

Official calls for less traffic through Tsiigehtchic during coronavirus threat

Written By: John McFadden

The interim manager for the Gwichya Gwich'in Band in Tsiigehtchic says he would like to see traffic through the community decreased during the coronavirus threat.

Brian Smith says there are simply too many people coming through the community.

"Because we are not that far from Inuvik we get a lot of people going through - people from Inuvik, people from Fort MacPherson, even people from Whitehorse. Right now, the self-isolation is not working," Smith told the Dene Nation. "We've sent letters to the MLA (Frederick Blake), the RCMP and the chief public health officer expressing our concerns."

Smith says, he would like to see bylaw officers posted on the outskirts of the community to monitor who is coming in and making sure those people are following protocols such as two weeks of self-isolation before going out into the community.

Smith says as far as he knows a funeral scheduled for next week is still going ahead.

He also believes a snowmobiler from the Yukon made their way into the community and that one Tsiigehtchic resident may have been on the same plane as a person from Inuvik who has since been diagnosed with COVID-19.

Of the five cases in the Northwest Territories, none were diagnosed in Tsiigehtchic.

Smith says he has also noticed that alcohol consumption in the community has risen during the coronavirus outbreak. "People are bored and lonely so there is a lot more partying going on," he said.

Smith says, it's only an hour and a half drive to the liquor store in Inuvik and he says he would like to see a restriction on how much alcohol can be bought at one time until the pandemic passes.

He adds he expects the situation to get much better in the coming weeks.

"Break up is not for another three to four weeks. If we can just get through to that time then we would have about five or six weeks of isolation," Smith said. "The odd person goes over in a boat but that is about it."

Smith says, residents have been going out on the land as Dene National Chief Norman Yakeleya suggested they should. However, he says, they have been making short trips and returning - not staying out for ten days to two weeks as some have recommended.

Smith says social distancing can be challenging in a small community where everybody knows everybody. He estimates that 75 percent of the community's residents are following the social distancing and other health safety protocols.

Smith says some Elders in the community are fearful of even going outside their homes because of the coronavirus threat. He adds, however, that groceries are being delivered and everyone is checking in their neighbours, relatives and friends in the tight-knit community.

Smith says twice a week notices have been going out on the community's radio station - offering any and all help to anyone who might need help.