

Whose beach is it?

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By Denis Langlois

Hundreds attend citizens' meeting about first nation claim to stretch of Sauble

Speakers at a Friends of Sauble Beach public meeting told a packed house of about 500 people Saturday morning that they fear South Bruce Peninsula will "just give our beach away" to Saugeen First Nation.

Representatives of the citizens' group and the meeting's keynote speaker, Craig Gammie, told the crowd at the Sauble Beach Community Centre that they have proof the Saugeen Ojibway territory was not meant to extend north of Main St. at Sauble Beach - where the boundary is today - and encouraged those in attendance to write and call council members to ask them to fight to retain the beach.

"In my view, the evidence is compelling. The reserve ends at Main St.," Gammie said during a one-hour meeting that began at 9:30 a.m.

"That leaves us with a problem. And that problem is, in spite of this very compelling evidence, it appears that our mayor wants to give the beach away. And I think that's a problem. I think with this kind of compelling evidence that he should be saying no."

Gammie said a line in a July 2 news release issued by South Bruce Peninsula that says the town has entered into mediation regarding a First Nations' land claim for Sauble Beach "with the intent to ensure continued public access to Sauble Beach" strongly implies that Mayor John Close's aim is "to give away the beach to the Saugeen Ojibway First Nations, but he's going to make sure that residents still have access."

Close, who did not attend the meeting, disputed Gammie's statement in a telephone interview Saturday afternoon.

The news release, he said, was not meant to suggest that the town is attempting only to maintain public access to the beach.

Close said neither he nor council has ever signed anything "that has any indication that we're about to give away Sauble Beach."

Mediation talks regarding the land claim are in the earliest stages, he said.

Confidentiality agreements ban him for revealing what has been discussed in mediation so far. "Council has made it quite clear that nothing will be agreed upon unless we have full public consultation; public meetings on it. So we haven't even hit that stage on it yet. We're following a normal court procedure of mediation and, as soon as we can come up with something, we will arrange for public meetings and have full public consultation," he said.

Close said his "gut feeling" is the claims against the mayor made at the public meeting are simply an "election stunt."

South Bruce Peninsula confirmed last week that a First Nations' land claim regarding Sauble Beach is still proceeding to litigation, but said the town is participating in a mediation process "to protect the public's interest in Sauble Beach" and "in an attempt to avoid significant costs to

taxpayers for the town to engage in what may be a lengthy litigation process."

All parties involved in mediation have signed confidentiality agreements, the town said.

Saugeen First Nation Chief Vernon Roote said Saturday that the land promised to the local First Nation in 1854, as part of Treaty No. 72, extended north along Sauble Beach to just north of what is now 6th St.

Former chief Randall Kaghee, in a May 2013 Saugeen First Nation newsletter, said almost all of the land along what is now called Sauble Beach was promised to the First Nation as part of the treaty.

"This land was reserved for us, including the portion of beach just south of the mouth of the Sauble River, because it was a valuable fishery for our people," he wrote.

"The promise was never fulfilled. The governments of Canada and Ontario never recognized an additional 1.5-mile strip of land along the beach as being part of our reserve. Despite clear evidence of the (Charles) Rankin survey and the plain language of our treaty, both Ontario and the neighbouring township refused to recognize this strip of land as ours."

A lawsuit was filed by the federal government on behalf of the First Nation in 1990 with the intent of reclaiming land for the band. In 1995 Saugeen First Nation filed its own suit.

Gammie, who is running for councillor in South Bruce Peninsula, said he has spent a lot of time researching Treaty No. 72 and studying the survey maps by Rankin.

He told the public meeting that he and the Friends group believe the northern boundary of the reserve was intended to be at Main St.

"Rankin put the top of the reserve actually slightly south of Main St. It's very clear on the maps. And every other map that I've looked at has the northern terminus of the reserve at or near Main St.," he said.

"Rankin's work and every other map that I've looked at confirms my analysis of the treaty."

John Strachan, chairman of Saturday's meeting, said they had planned to share Gammie's research with South Bruce Peninsula council, but their delegation was denied.

The town's lawyers had recommended council not receive the delegation.

"The only reason we are here today is because council was forbidden from seeing what you are about to see," he said, before Gammie's presentation.

Kathy Strachan, president of the Friends of Sauble Beach, said the group has "no issue" with the First Nation or its pursuit of the land claim, but is concerned that South Bruce Peninsula residents are being "shut out" of the process by the town and that the mayor is "giving away the beach."

She said she is concerned that if the land claim is successful, north Sauble Beach will become like South Sauble where vehicles are allowed to drive on the beach and "extreme raking" of the sand is undertaken.

"We don't want to pay to walk on the beach," she said.

George Heigenhauser, a resident of the former Albemarle Township, said people should be cautious about believing everything that was presented at the meeting.

"None of us are lawyers and none of us are surveyors," he said.

Heigenhauser, who questioned Gammie's research during the question-and-answer segment of

the meeting, said people should respect the Saugeen Ojibway for pursuing their land claim.

So many people showed up for the public meeting in Sauble Beach that organizers had to stop allowing people inside the community centre because the size of the crowd had reached the limit set out in the building's fire code.

A second meeting was held at 10:30 a.m. for those that couldn't attend the first one.

An image of a family playing on a beach, with the words "Please Mr. Mayor, Don't Give Our Beach Away," was projected on a screen at the front of the room as people entered the community centre.

Attendees were asked to pick up a sheet of paper that listed the contact information for each South Bruce Peninsula council member as they left the meeting.

Gammie said people can e-mail each council members and "play the broken record, don't give our beach away, don't give our beach away.

"The evidence is compelling that it's our beach," he said.