

Monday Sept. 20/04

Activists rise on First Nation

AAMIWNAANG MEMBERS SPEAKING OUT OVER WORRIES ABOUT POLLUTION

Editor's note: This is the conclusion of a two-part series on environmental concerns on Aamijwnaang First Nation.

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The Observer

AAMIWNAANG FIRST NATION — After living surrounded by chemical plants for so many years, there's a sense among residents here that

something has gone wrong. It began earlier this year with reports of rampant asthma among young children. It grew with anecdotal stories of multiple miscarriages, and of large numbers of school children with developmental delays. But the kicker came this summer when the band's registry confirmed what women had been noticing themselves —

SPECIAL REPORT

Over the past five years, the First Nation has had nearly two girls born for every boy, a puzzling trend at odds with the usual ratio of slightly more boys born than girls. Though what's behind it all isn't clear, some suspect environmental contaminants. For the first time, after years of chemical spills and air releases, this First Nation is undergoing a wave of activism. An environmental committee was born this summer and

an emergency co-ordinator hired and given an office. In July, residents voted in a number of reform-minded band councillors. The activists make no apologies. "There are some people here who use of the mindset: 'Let's just take what we can get from industry,'" said Vicki Ware, who co-ordinates the committee. "Well I'm sorry, but no amount of money is going to buy our health."

The restlessness started four years ago with a pair of serious chemical spills at Nova Chemical that exposed the need for a better public warning system. Former Chief Phil Maness was outspoken about the tardy notification, and co-chaired an industry-municipal committee that led to the installation of warning sirens. But a string of spills followed, provoking even deeper resentment. And in May, hundreds of old chemical barrels, some leaking into the ground, were left on the reserve by a private individual. The final straw was a proposal by Suncor Energy to build a

world-class ethanol plant across the street from the band office. Council got an environmental lawyer and called a general meeting. Out of the demonstrations that followed came a group of concerned individuals that hunted down research and asked tough questions. "From the ethanol plant it became: 'This is enough. This is ridiculous,'" said Ware, the band's human resources worker. "It got people motivated and excited to do more for the community."

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