

25 years of change on Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation lands.



February 12, 2021, marked an important anniversary for Georgina Island. Twenty-five years ago, leadership from 13 First Nations across the country traveled to our community to meet with the late Minister Ron Irwin to sign the *Framework Agreement on First Nation Land Management*. The occasion was historic in Canada. It was the first time First Nations leaders had developed and negotiated a government-to-government agreement with Canada to provide recognition and legal capacity for our peoples to exercise their inherent rights to govern their reserve lands and natural resources. In short, the agreement gave those First Nations who

took up the option the ability to regain control over their reserve lands. Former Chief William McCue and the Council of that time were some of the Framework Agreement's strongest supporters. This led to the historic ceremony being held at Georgina Island on February 12, 1996. Chief and Council made sure that all members were well informed and involved in the development of our land code, which brought into effect the principles of the Framework Agreement. This effort resulted in Georgina Island becoming the first community in Canada to vote to regain governance over our Reserve lands, Natural Resources, and Environment, approving our land code in 1997.

On January 1, 2000, the first day of the new Millennium, Georgina Island's Land Code came into effect, and with it, 25% of the *Indian Act* ceased to apply to our lands. As a community, we hit the ground running. Chief and Council quickly began to act on many of the areas that had been stalled or ignored under the *Indian Act*. Georgina Island made it clear from the beginning that we were now in control. We met with municipal, provincial and federal government officials to forge new working relationships, ones that respected and recognized our jurisdiction over our lands. We instituted environmental laws and standards to protect our lands and lake and studied future land usage to ensure that our cultural and traditional needs were met. We audited the funds owing to Georgina Island from those in arrears and placed policies to ensure timely future payments. Businesses flourished for many island members, and improvements to island amenities proceeded at a faster pace. Even our Aazhaawe ferry came about as a direct result of our involvement with the Framework Agreement.

Today, Georgina Island enjoys a very different outlook than it did only a few decades ago. Our children are now growing up in an era of empowerment. Our Nation no longer has to seek permission from Canada to make decisions on our lands. Instead, we seek direction and approval on important projects from our own membership and proceed on our own schedule. There are jobs for our youth, businesses to fund special projects, and infrastructure improvements to all our members' benefit.

Since becoming the first community to regain this land governance authority, 99 other First Nations across the country have established their own land codes. Well over 100 more hope to do the same. Our reputation as leaders in First Nation land governance has placed us at head tables in important conversations at all levels of government. Our land code has provided the vehicle our members needed to solidify the future they envisioned, free from outside interference on our reserve lands, and with a keen eye toward preserving and sustaining our lands and way of life. We have accomplished much over these last 25 years, and this success will build an even stronger foundation for Georgina Island in the years to follow.

For more information on the 25th Anniversary of the Framework Agreement's signing, and to view messages from First Nations across the country, visit <https://landsadvisoryboard.ca/25th-anniversary/>