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Nunavimmiut gather at economic conference

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KUUJJUAQ — More than 200 Nunavimmiut from every community in the region gathered in Kuujjuaq this week for the Katutjiniq Socio-economic Conference, a gathering aimed at guiding communities and governments in improving the use of government handout money for economic and social development.

The conference was sponsored by the Quebec provincial government.

After a late start on Wednesday due to bad weather and transportation problems, conference chair Johnny Adams urged those present to use their time at the meeting well.

"We're here to plan what our vision is for the future," Adams told them. "You will be here to gather resources for your communities, and you'll be responsible for using the tools in your communities."

The conference is a follow-up to consultations that came up with development plans for all of Nunavik's communities. Their plans include an astonishing 495 projects that they would like to realize over the next five years.

Some attending the Katutjiniq Conference said they would have liked to have seen more emphasis on how to improve the social and economic life of the region through business development instead of relying on public money.

The 495 proposed projects have a price tag of around \$210 million.

"We have to keep in mind that the two levels of government spent \$250 million in the region last year, \$180 million from Quebec and \$70 million from the federal government," Adams said. "Some of these projects are already being funded with this money."

The projects focus mainly on the economy, youth, communications, culture and elders, education, health, recreation, child care and women. They involve building new facilities or equipping existing ones, such as churches, and starting up small-scale service businesses.

Katutjiniq delegates broke into workshops during the three-day event to discuss how to turn these projects into reality.

But before they began their brainstorming, they heard the results of a study by Gérard Duhaime on Nunavik's high cost of living and the conclusions of a report on jobs in Nunavik prepared by the Kativik Regional Government.

Both these studies show the magnitude of the challenges facing Nunavimmiut.

According to the KRG study, only one out of four adult Inuit in Nunavik are working full-time. About 60 per cent of the population is unemployed much of the year.

"Besides the mining sector, job creation has been rather modest, that is to say, nonexistent in several sectors," the KRG report says.

The new jobs that have been created in the region generally require a higher education, and Nunavimmiut have been losing these jobs to Southerners. The percentage of full-time jobs held by Inuit actually slipped from 63 per cent to 56 per cent in 1998.

And the picture isn't much brighter in the Montreal-based Inuit organizations, where only 13 per cent of the 490 jobs are held by Inuit.

Education, the conference heard, is the key to Nunavimmiut taking more of these existing jobs.

The conference was to feature visits by the federal minister Alfonso Gagliano, responsible for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and Denis Codère, Sec. of State for Recreation and Sports.

Delegates also called for the creation of a Nunavik Bureau of Statistics.

Despite its late start, the bash was scheduled to end on Friday, with a feast and music concert.

Similar socioeconomic conferences have already been held in the other regions of Quebec, although several of these regions have criticized the "think-tank" process for its lack of concrete results.