



**First Nations Capital
& Infrastructure Agency
of Saskatchewan**

2025

*Governance, Housing, and
Infrastructure*

**Elders' Voices in Nation Building:
Lessons from the Past to Guide the Future**

Executive Summary

On November 1, 2024, the First Nations Capital and Infrastructure Agency of Saskatchewan (FNCIAS) hosted an Elder Engagement Session to gather insights on how traditional First Nations governance principles can inform Nation-led housing and infrastructure approaches. This report highlights key themes and Elder perspectives, providing guidance on how FNCIAS can better support Member Nations. The insights captured in this report can also assist Member Nations in shaping their housing and infrastructure plans, strengthening Nation-driven development strategies, and identifying culturally aligned approaches to long-term planning. It reflects FNCIAS's commitment to respecting traditional knowledge while assisting First Nations in strengthening their housing and infrastructure systems in a culturally informed way.

Key Outcomes

- 1. Strengthened relationships with Member Nations through ongoing dialogue and trust.**
- 2. Recognition of traditional teachings, including ceremonies and land-based stewardship, as vital considerations in housing and infrastructure planning.**
- 3. Guidance for culturally aligned housing policies and community programs.**
- 4. Supporting Member Nations in reducing housing and infrastructure vulnerabilities by addressing systemic barriers through a culturally informed approach.**

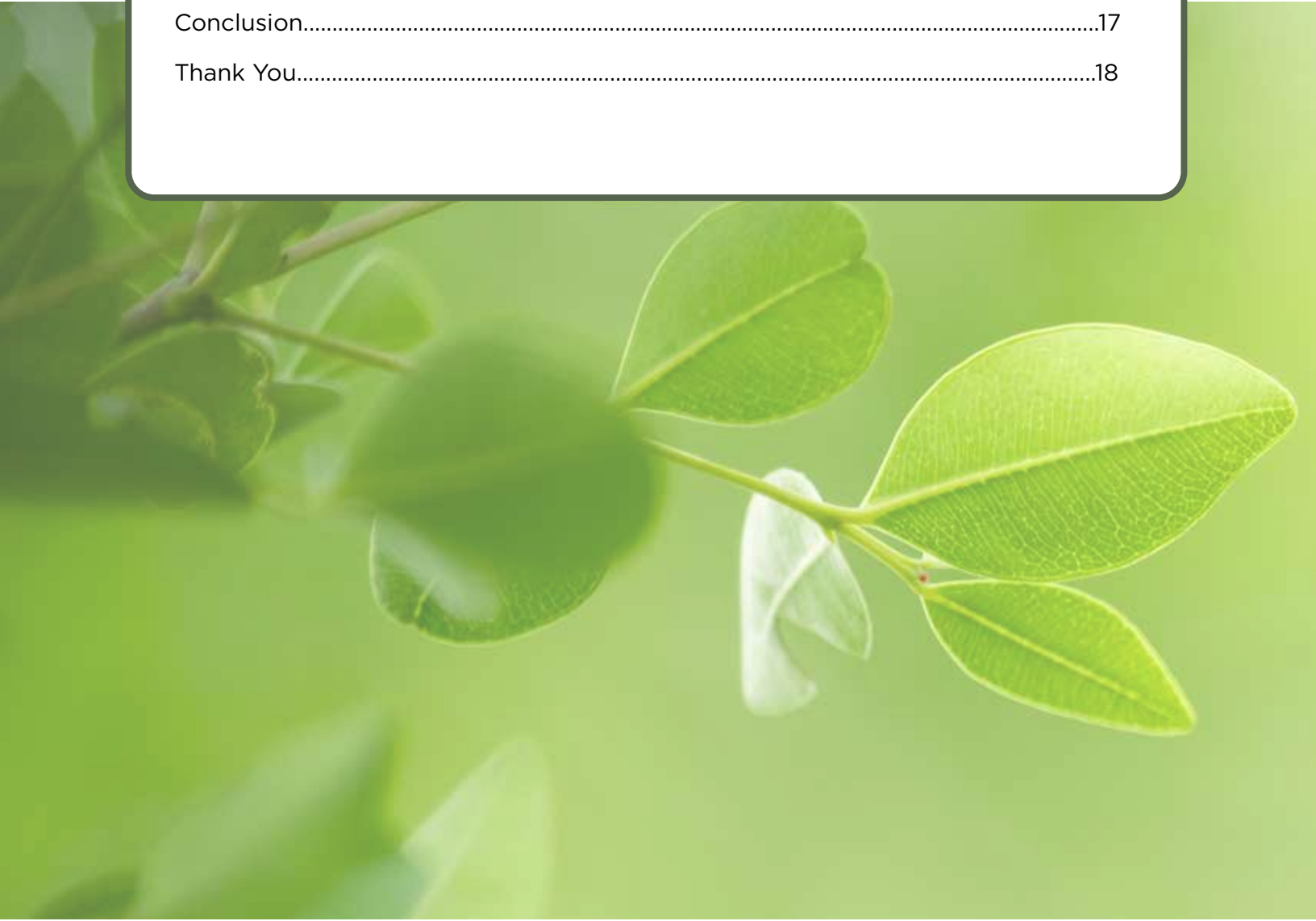


“The strength of our Nations begins with strong homes rooted in our traditions and teachings passed on through our Elders.”

- Drew Pearson, CEO, FNCIAS

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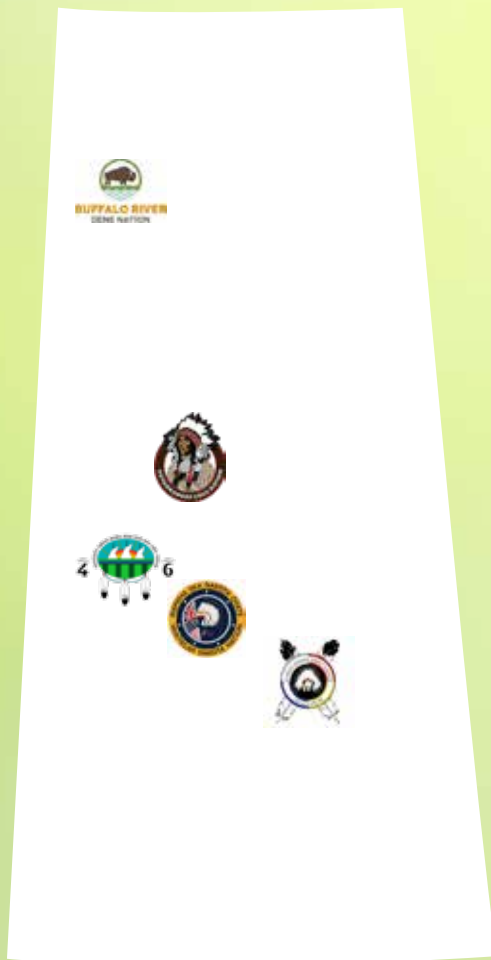
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Introduction

FNCIAS recognizes the important role of Elders as stewards of cultural traditions and the history of First Nations peoples. On November 1, 2024, FNCIAS invited six Elders from five Nations to share their perspectives on the connections between traditional governance, housing, and infrastructure. Their insights provided valuable guidance on how FNCIAS can better support Member Nations in strengthening Nation-driven housing and infrastructure initiatives.

This engagement was an opportunity to build relationships and ensure that Elders' voices are reflected in discussions on culturally aligned approaches to housing and infrastructure. By honouring traditional knowledge and recognizing Nation priorities, FNCIAS aims to assist Nations in achieving their long-term goals.



Participating Nations

- Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation
- Buffalo River Dene Nation
- Kawacatoose First Nation
- Mosquito Grizzly Bear's Head Lean Man First Nation
- Whitecap Dakota First Nation

The Engagement Process

FNCIAS' engagement philosophy is rooted in collaboration, respect, and cultural integrity. Engaging with Elders provides invaluable guidance, ensuring that FNCIAS understands and supports Nation-led approaches to housing and infrastructure that are informed by traditions, culture, and governance. Elders' knowledge helps FNCIAS recognize the deep connections between housing, Nationhood, and governance, reinforcing the importance of culturally aligned solutions. FNCIAS is committed to building trust through transparency and ongoing dialogue with Member Nations, recognizing engagement as an evolving process of listening and learning.

Structure of the Day



Opening prayer

Elders began the day with prayer and ceremonial blessings.



Discussion rounds

Conversations focused on the past, present, and future of housing and governance.



Closing reflections

Elders shared their final teachings and provided blessings for FNCIAS's journey.

Engagement Questions

Questions were structured to guide the discussion through reflecting on the past, looking at the present and moving towards the future.

Past

What would the roles and responsibilities of people be before reserves?

What type of care and attention would have gone into keeping a home and community secure and thriving?

What would traditional governance and laws have looked like in the past?

Present

What are some of the current housing and infrastructure challenges you see today in your Nation?

What are some solutions needed right now to address the current state of housing?

Beyond housing, what other ideal facilities or buildings are needed to support your nation?

Future

How can we move forward with holding our traditions and fostering a secure home and nation?

What should housing and infrastructure look like to you in your nation?

How will traditional governance and values aid your nation's housing and infrastructure needs?

Remembering what was discussed this morning, and as we move forward, what advice can you give and leave with FNCIAS?



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 "Irene
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 leads - Karen
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What are some solutions needed right now to address the current state of housing? (present)

- Ceremonies - passing on knowledge coming together as a team and reg
- Elders teaching & passing on the knowledge
- language, songs & ceremonies & passing the knowledge & traditions on, listening to the young people - and reg
- Strong housing policy - Karen
- little of the land & the ownership of the land & we are told what to do to our land
- Section 38 - BC & Mistawasis
- ramp not charging people & related to politics that we own - Bill

What are some challenges you currently see today w housing & infrastructure in your nation? (present)

- home ownership vs own home contents - Karen
- not enough housing - Irene
- CMHC housing - bought everything for fit & renovation for the future generations & the future to come - Merv
- urban members want to come back & no housing - Irene
- mortgage - paying more for the mortgage - bill
- how the housing selections are made & these political & the wait

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Voices of Wisdom

Elders from the northern, central, and southern regions of Saskatchewan shared diverse cultural perspectives, reflecting Cree, Dene, Dakota, and Saulteaux traditions. Their teachings, grounded in land stewardship, kinship, and governance, reinforced the deep connections between housing, Nationhood, and cultural identity. Elders emphasized the importance of cultural identity, inter-Nation collaboration, and traditional ceremonies in informing Nation-led housing and infrastructure planning.



Karen Greyeyes

Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation
Northern Region

“Home, for me, means having your own space in this world, and it’s probably more important the older you get—that your own home is truly your space.”



Dorothy Benjamin

Buffalo River Dene Nation
Northern Region

“What home and housing mean to me is having a place on the reserve where we live and call our own. What it would look like is for every single parent or single person to have their own housing.”



BUFFALO RIVER
DENE NATION



Martin Benjamin

Buffalo River Dene Nation
Northern Region

“We need to communicate together for all the Nations in Saskatchewan. We should be united and do a better job.”



BUFFALO RIVER
DENE NATION



William Strongarm

Kawacatoose First Nation
Southern Region

“Housing, to me, is when you enter a home, it is tawâw—which means everything is secure, and everything is safely in that house for the person to enter.”



Audrey Wahobin

Mosquito Grizzly Bear's Head Lean Man First Nation
Central Region

“A lot of people in the urban south want to come home. Someday, we will have the future come in—our children will need homes.”



Irene Royal

Whitecap Dakota First Nation
Central Region

“Housing means a lot. And it means even more to me today, being here [at this session].”



Engagement Outcomes

Thematic Analysis Under HOME

The engagement session provided invaluable insights from Elders, which have been organized under FNCIAS's guiding principles of Humility, Openness, Modernization, and Excellence (HOME) answering the questions looking to the past, present, and future with the thematic analysis below.

Humility

Past Practices

Families supported each other through collective tasks such as hunting, sewing, and maintaining the home fire.

Elders taught younger generations essential skills like pimâcihowin (making a good living) and emphasized roles that sustained balance in the nation.

Ceremonial practices, like raising a pipe when a new home was built, acknowledged the Creator's role and promoted gratitude.

The Nation worked together to sustain its survival and followed the natural laws set by the Creator.

Present Challenges

A decline in collective responsibility and mutual care due to socio-economic challenges and addiction issues.

Future Guidance

Restore humility by fostering kinship-based housing policies and reintroducing ceremonies to strengthen the people and their Nation.

Openness

Past Practices

Frequent visits and shared resources fostered openness and strengthened nation-hood.

Housing decisions respected natural laws and traditional protocols.

Present Challenges

Political favoritism and lack of transparency in housing allocations create divisions.

No autonomy over own Nation's affairs and funding is done through the federal government. This creates inadequate funding and competition between Nations.

Future Guidance

Promote transparency through clear and fair housing policies.

Encourage openness by creating communal spaces for dialogue and connection.

Modernization

Past Practices

Housing was sustainable, using only what was needed. Traditional home-building methods were deeply connected to the land and aided by sharing resources.

Present Challenges

CMHC policies limit renovations and culturally relevant housing designs.

Restricted access to natural resources hinders self-sufficient practices.

Future Guidance

Advocate for policy changes to empower Nations in building homes using local resources.

Integrate traditional designs with modern infrastructure to reflect cultural values and needs.

Excellence

Past Practices

Governance emphasized accountability and pride in maintaining homes and Nations.

Ceremonies and teachings instilled a deep respect for land and housing.

Present Challenges

Poor living conditions, inadequate housing, resources and materials, and lack of home maintenance education undermine community well-being.

Future Guidance

Develop programs that promote excellence in housing care, including workshops on homeownership and maintenance, and homeowner's manual. Programming should be culturally relevant too, i.e.: smudging one's home.

Integration of Elders' Feedback Into Themes

Cultural Views on Housing & Infrastructure

FNCIAS carefully reviewed the insights shared by Elders, recognizing recurring themes that reflect both historical teachings and contemporary challenges in housing and infrastructure. To honor their perspectives and ensure meaningful application, we grouped their feedback into broader themes that capture the essence of their guidance.

1 Cultural Significance

Elders emphasized the importance of preserving traditional practices and teachings as the cornerstone of a Nation's identity. They highlighted specific cultural ceremonies, such as seasonal gatherings and rites of passage, and that have been integral to maintaining cultural continuity. The feedback underscored the need for intergenerational learning spaces where youth can engage with knowledge keepers to ensure cultural connections and protocols.

2 Resilience and Adaptation

Elders shared stories of perseverance through historical challenges, including displacement, residential schools, and systemic barriers.

They also noted how traditional knowledge systems have been adapted to address modern challenges, such as using Indigenous governance models to navigate contemporary housing and infrastructure issues.

3 Nation Impact

Elders stressed the interconnectedness of individual well-being with the health of the Nation. They pointed out how the revival of community gardens and communal spaces fosters unity and addresses food security issues. Elders also advocated for initiatives that empower youth to take active roles in community decision-making processes.

4 Identity and Belonging

Elders reflected on the sense of belonging that comes from being connected to ancestral lands. They spoke of the need to ensure that every Nation member, regardless of age or status, feels rooted in their identity through language revitalization programs and cultural gatherings. They also shared concerns about how urban migration is impacting this connection and suggested that there should be ways to bridge the gap for those living away from traditional territories.

5

Collaborations and Partnerships

Elders acknowledged the value of partnerships with neighboring communities, government agencies, and non-profits to enhance infrastructure and housing. They emphasized that these collaborations must respect Indigenous sovereignty and traditional decision-making processes. They shared examples of successful partnerships, such as joint education programs and shared resource management projects.

6

Equity and Accessibility

Elders voiced concerns about unequal access to resources within the community, particularly for elders and single-parent families. They advocated for equitable distribution of housing and infrastructure benefits, ensuring that the most vulnerable are prioritized. Elders also highlighted the need for physical and cultural accessibility in community buildings and public spaces.

7

Sustainability

Elders provided insights into sustainable practices rooted in traditional ecological knowledge, such as water stewardship and renewable building materials. They suggested integrating these practices into modern infrastructure projects to ensure long-term environmental balance. They also emphasized the importance of teaching younger generations about sustainable living.

8

Aspirations and Goals

Elders shared their vision of a thriving, self-sustaining community that embraces both tradition and innovation. They expressed hopes for improved housing, education, and health systems that are culturally aligned. They envisioned a community where cultural knowledge is celebrated, and all members have access to opportunities for growth and prosperity.

9

Lessons Learned

Elders reflected on lessons from past Nation initiatives, stressing the importance of inclusive decision-making and the dangers of external dependency, i.e.: funding from and reporting to the federal government.

10

Unresolved Challenges

Elders identified ongoing challenges, such as the lack of funding for cultural, recreational, educational and addictions programs, and the difficulty of retaining youth within the community. They also mentioned the gaps in mental health and elder care services. Addressing these issues was seen as essential for holistic community well-being.

Recommendations for FNCIAS Operations

FNCIAS is committed to ensuring that the guidance shared by Elders informs how we support Member Nations in housing and infrastructure planning. The following recommendations highlight key areas where FNCIAS can assist Nations in integrating traditional governance principles, strengthening Nation-driven solutions, and supporting long-term planning efforts based on their priorities.

Honouring Traditional Knowledge in Housing and Infrastructure

Housing and infrastructure are deeply connected to cultural values, historical knowledge, and First Nations' strength and self-determination. These spaces reflect the identities, traditions, and aspirations of each Nation. Through Elder engagement, we have identified key areas where traditional knowledge can guide housing and infrastructure approaches, and FNCIAS remains committed to supporting Nations that wish to incorporate these principles in their planning.

Balance Between Tradition and Innovation

Elders emphasized the importance of incorporating traditional knowledge into modern infrastructure. FNCIAS will work to ensure vendors are aware of traditional practices, cultural protocols, and Nation-led priorities in site selection, housing design, and infrastructure planning. By facilitating dialogue between First Nations and industry professionals, FNCIAS supports the integration of modern engineering solutions that align with traditional knowledge and the long-term vision of each Nation.

Advancing Policy for First Nations-Led Housing

Elders expressed deep concern about housing and infrastructure policies that limit Nation sovereignty and self-sufficiency. Supporting policy discussions at the federal and provincial levels is critical to advancing self-determined housing solutions. FNCIAS assists Member Nations by identifying policy barriers, providing research and technical analysis, and facilitating discussions that help Nations advocate for their housing priorities. This includes supporting Nations in navigating CMHC regulations, exploring pathways for greater flexibility in funding, and ensuring that policies reflect Nation-driven housing approaches.

Strengthening Community Connections

Elders emphasized the importance of dedicated spaces where traditional knowledge can be passed down through generations. They highlighted the need for gathering places within Nations that foster cultural dialogue, storytelling, and mentorship. FNCIAS supports Nations by assisting with the integration of these spaces within housing and infrastructure planning, ensuring they reflect Nation priorities and cultural traditions.

Embedding Culture and Tradition in FNCIAS Programs

Ensuring Long-Term Sustainability

Sustainability is deeply rooted in First Nations ways of knowing and governance. Elders emphasized the importance of balancing modern engineering with land-based knowledge and ecological stewardship, ensuring that Nation-driven sustainability strategies reflect cultural values and long-term priorities. FNCIAS supports Nations in exploring sustainable approaches to housing and infrastructure by facilitating connections to resources, technical expertise, and knowledge-sharing opportunities.

Collaborating for Lasting Impact

Building Meaningful Partnerships

Elders emphasized the importance of collaboration in strengthening Nation-driven housing and infrastructure solutions. FNCIAS supports Nations by facilitating access to technical expertise and assisting with relationship-building where requested. Partnerships must respect Indigenous sovereignty, ensuring that Nations retain full control over decision-making processes. FNCIAS remains committed to supporting Nations in establishing collaborations that align with their housing and infrastructure priorities.

Prioritizing Equity and Accessibility

Elders emphasized the importance of ensuring that housing and infrastructure meet the diverse needs of all Nation members. FNCIAS supports Nations in identifying barriers to equitable housing access and exploring solutions that align with their priorities. This includes facilitating discussions on physical and cultural accessibility and sharing best practices that respect Nation sovereignty. FNCIAS remains committed to assisting Nations in addressing systemic challenges while ensuring they retain full control over decision-making processes.

Embedding Traditional Knowledge in Sustainability Strategies

Elders have long practiced sustainable living, emphasizing the importance of water stewardship, natural building materials, and environmental responsibility. FNCIAS supports Nations in exploring ways to integrate these traditional sustainability practices into their housing and infrastructure planning. This includes facilitating priorities with Nations and assisting Nations in identifying opportunities to engage youth in sustainability initiatives that align with Nation priorities.

Next Steps

Turning Recommendations into Action

FNCIAS is committed to ensuring that the insights shared by Elders serve as a valuable resource for both FNCIAS and Member Nations. These perspectives will help FNCIAS refine how it supports Nations while also providing guidance that Nations can use in their housing and infrastructure planning. Moving forward, FNCIAS will take the following steps to ensure these insights are accessible:

1. Developing an External Engagement Report

This report will be shared with FNCIAS staff, Member Nations, and stakeholders to serve as a valuable resource in housing and infrastructure planning. For Member Nations, it provides a reference for integrating traditional knowledge into their decision-making processes. Internally, it will help FNCIAS refine its support strategies, ensuring alignment with Nation priorities. Where appropriate, FNCIAS will also share key insights with industry partners to foster a broader understanding of culturally aligned infrastructure solutions and Nation-driven approaches.

2. Establishing an Ongoing Elder Engagement Process

Recognizing the value of continued Elder guidance, FNCIAS will work with Nations to explore opportunities for ongoing Elder engagement. This process will be flexible and Nation-led, ensuring that Elders' voices continue to shape both FNCIAS's support strategies and Nation-driven housing and infrastructure solutions.

The knowledge shared by Elders in this engagement is invaluable, providing guidance that will continue to inform FNCIAS's work and support Member Nations in shaping their housing and infrastructure priorities. FNCIAS remains committed to ensuring that these insights are respected, shared appropriately, and used to strengthen the connection between traditional knowledge and Nation-driven solutions. By continuing to listen, learn, and facilitate discussions, FNCIAS will uphold its role as a trusted partner in supporting Nations' long-term planning efforts.

Conclusion

The insights shared by Elders throughout this engagement reaffirm the importance of traditional knowledge in shaping housing and infrastructure priorities. Their wisdom offers guidance that Member Nations can draw upon as they develop approaches that reflect their values, governance structures, and long-term goals. FNCIAS is committed to supporting Nations by ensuring these insights are accessible and available as a resource in housing and infrastructure planning.

As FNCIAS moves forward, it will continue to strengthen relationships with Elders, Member Nations, and key stakeholders to support sustainable, Nation-driven approaches. By maintaining an open dialogue and learning from the knowledge keepers of First Nations, FNCIAS will help facilitate discussions that bridge traditional governance principles with modern infrastructure planning. Through this commitment, FNCIAS remains a trusted partner in supporting Nations as they create solutions that reflect their identities, priorities, and aspirations.







Unit 104, 335 Packham Avenue
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 4S1
306.500.7990 • fncias.ca