

Guarding the environment

By GEORGE MATHEWSON
The Observer

Environmental issues are taking on new significance for the Aamjiwnaang First Nation, a community both squeezed and pulled by industrial development.

"The land, the air, the water — these are issues not just for us, but the community as a whole, including Corunna and Sarnia," said Chief Phil Maness.

"I think we can build some common goals and objectives to address these issues from the grassroots level."

Heading the list of concerns is a world-scale ethanol plant proposed by Suncor Energy. The company has purchased land opposite the reserve on Churchill Road, between Vidal Street and Tashmoo Avenue, and consulted openly with the band about the \$120-million project.

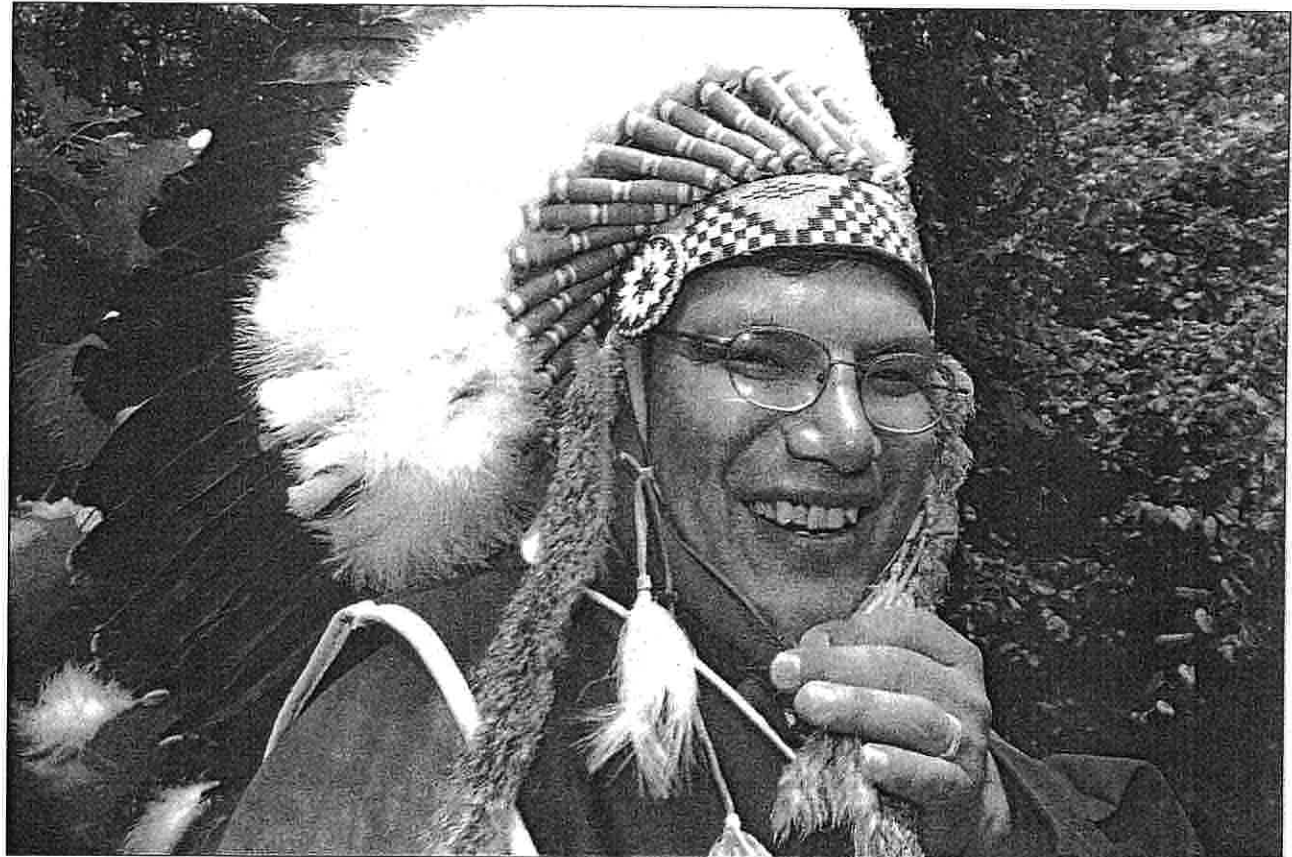
Residents aren't opposed to an ethanol plant, Maness said, they just don't want it built on their doorstep.

"What we're looking for is an alternative. Where that site is encroaches on our greenspace."

A series of chemical releases in recent years has raised health concerns among Aamjiwnaang members, a situation that was explored in a recent program about the Chemical Valley aired by CBC's Disclosure.

The show was rebroadcast following a Feb. 1 spill by Imperial Oil that prompted the Ontario Environment Ministry to send its environmental SWAT team to Sarnia.

The 30-member team was charged with inspecting petrochemical companies to



Aamjiwnaang Chief Phil Maness is pictured here in a ceremonial headdress at the annual pow wow in this file photo.

GLENN OGILVIE The Observer

make sure their operations follow all regulations. But Maness isn't convinced checking certificates of approval and other paperwork is sufficient protection against another mishap.

"It will be disappointing if they come back and say, 'Well, these guys are within the regulations,'" he said.

"I think there has to be some legislative changes. Hopefully, with some public input, we will see that happen."

On the other hand, controlled development is part of the First Nation's long-term business plan. Indeed, expansion has left the band with a pleasant problem — a

nearly full industrial park.

A consultant was hired to prepare a report after band members approved a proposal to add another 245 acres of reserve land to the original 28-acre site.

Maness said there have been requests for information from prospective investors, but band officials

are moving cautiously.

"We want more community input," he said. "We're getting a lot of inquiries, but we want to do this in a way that the community has ownership of it."

Seventeen businesses in the industrial park employ more than 100 people and about half of them are band

members. The companies also provide training and apprenticeships for young people, helping ensure an increased opportunity.

If the business park does expand, the growth would take place in an area bounded by the current site, Scott Road, Highway 40 and LaSalle Line.