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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WORKSHOP BRINGS FIRST NATIONS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TOGETHER TO TALK PARTNERSHIPS

Penticton, B.C. – First Nations and local government staff and elected officials from around the Okanagan are gathering in Penticton today to discuss the value and benefits of joint service agreements and joint water infrastructure projects.

The day-long workshop, being held at the Penticton Trade & Convention Centre, is entitled “Sharing water, building agreements.” It is sponsored by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities’ Community Infrastructure Partnership Program (CIPP) and the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB).

“All of us are facing financial challenges - First Nations and local governments. We also share one water in this valley and depend on each other for good water quality,” noted OBWB executive director Anna Warwick Sears. “At the same time, we are faced with aging infrastructure that needs costly upgrades. But, we’re all neighbours and there are opportunities to work together on these issues.”

The purpose of the CIPP program is to connect municipalities with adjacent First Nation communities to improve the way infrastructure services are provided (e.g. water, sewer, roads, etc.) The idea is that by forming partnerships, sharing knowledge and expertise, and pooling assets, services can be improved at less cost.

Brian Titus, the Osoyoos Indian Band Development Corporation’s Chief Operating Officer and Barry Romanko, Chief Administrative Officer for the Town of Osoyoos, have both seen the benefits of such agreements to their community. Both are set to speak to the gathering today.

The town and Osoyoos Indian Band (OIB) have entered into service agreements for sewer, as well as fire protection, and Destination Osoyoos marketing. There have also been land exchanges to facilitate road connections. Some of the agreements date back to the late 1990s, they noted.

“There are economies of scale with these agreements,” explained Romanko. “Having more users on a system decreases municipal costs, and the funds help pay for infrastructure upgrades. These agreements make sense from a business perspective for our community,” he said.

“It has been very positive,” added Titus, noting a water service agreement is currently being negotiated for an OIB affordable housing development. “Without these agreements – especially for costly water and sewer projects – it would be much more difficult for us to do our developments.”

And, echoing Romanko’s comments, it’s not just the OIB that benefits. “These developments help us generate revenue and taxation, but they also employ people from the band and the South Okanagan in general,” Titus said.

According to Romanko, the workshop is intended to share information. First Nations and municipalities will hear examples of successes with agreements, but it’s also important to know the directions and goals of your neighbours, as well as the limitations, he added.

“This type of dialogue promotes better understanding.” And who knows, said Romanko, “Maybe we’ll find new areas we can partner on.”

The workshop has attracted First Nations and local government staff and elected officials from throughout the Okanagan, including representatives from Okanagan Nation Alliance, Okanagan Indian Band, Osoyoos Indian Band, the municipalities of Vernon, Lake Country, West Kelowna, Penticton, Osoyoos, and Regional District of Okanagan Similkameen.

- 30 -

MEDIA CONTACT:

Corinne Jackson, OBWB – Communications Director

Office: 250-469-6271 Mobile: 250-718-7249

E-mail: Corinne.Jackson@obwb.ca