



## 75<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE ALASKA HIGHWAY PUBLIC ART SCULPTURE



### OBJECTIVE

2017 will mark the 75th Anniversary of the building of the Alaska Highway. The building of this highway is perhaps the most significant event in the history of our community. Directly related to the Canadian and American participation in World War II, the highway was built in 1942 as a supply route to connect the United States to Alaska through Canada. The highway is 1300 miles long and was completed in eight months. This was no small feat given that the highway was built through wilderness and in a very challenging terrain and climate (northern Canada). Supplies for the construction of the highway were shipped by Northern Alberta Railway (NAR) to Dawson Creek (now known synonymously as Mile Zero). It is at this location, the NAR Park, Mile Zero, where our project, a public art sculpture, has been given conditional approval by the City of Dawson Creek to be permanently displayed.

Commissioning local artists, the Peace Liard Regional Arts Council (PLRAC) will oversee the modification of a Caterpillar Trencher (used in the construction of the Alaska Highway in 1942) into a public art sculpture. The artists, under the direction of three curators and one advisor, will work together to leave a legacy for the community emblemizing the perspectives of those impacted by this event: the pioneers, those who helped build the highway, and the community's Indigenous groups.

## **SUMMARY**

The Alaska Highway Public Art Sculpture will transform a Caterpillar Trencher (a piece of machinery used in the building of the Alaska Highway and donated to the PLRAC by Roger Gregoire, a local collector from Fort St. John) into a work of art. The art work will leave a legacy for our future by becoming a permanent art object, one which the PLRAC believes will be innovative enough to have a national scope. The project will provide an opportunity for all regional artists (with an emphasis on Indigenous artists), to share ideas, both personal and historical, related to the building of the Alaska Highway. The project will be curated by three local artists. Two of the curators, Emilie Mattson and her son Karl Mattson, are descended from this community's original pioneers and they continue to live on property that has been in the family for five generations. They have a proven track record with the City of Dawson Creek, having had two outdoor sculptures commissioned by the municipality. The third curator is Fort St. John Cree artist Adrienne Greyeyes, a recent graduate of the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. Adrienne is descended from one of the area's original Indigenous groups, and her ties to her community and her advocacy to retain their language and culture are deeply rooted. The project will be under the advisement of renowned artist Brian Jungen who was born in this area and is of local Dunne-za First Nations descent. Jungen is known for his found object large scale conceptual sculptures, and his work has been exhibited worldwide including shows at the Tate and Smithsonian. His work is also part of the National Gallery of Canada's permanent collection.

Local artists will have the opportunity to submit design components to the sculpture, providing these artists with the rare opportunity to work with the Mattsons under the advisement of Brian Jungen. We believe that having local artists of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous descent working together to create the sculpture will provide a unique opportunity for both to share stories of their heritage, both personal and historical as it relates to our community, to the Alaska Highway, and to Canada as a whole. We feel this project has the potential to strengthen ties between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of our community.

While the process of creating the public sculpture will encourage arts activities in our community and an appreciation of our heritage, once the sculpture is complete, it will continue to raise awareness of our community's history and experiences as well as recognize and promote the exceptional artistic talents that exist in our community.

The piece will speak to the experiences of the Indigenous people of our area as well as to the experiences of the pioneers and to those who built the highway. The first conceptual drawing incorporates the use of the tracks of the trencher. In this initial concept, we see culturally significant designs and words as "tracks" being cut into the metal, reflecting the continuing movement and circle of life as well as the continuation of the diverse cultures of our region and its corresponding impacts. By emphasizing the perspectives of the Indigenous community members alongside those of non-Indigenous, this sculpture will play an important role toward Canada's reconciliation and decolonization, a process deemed a priority in the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report.

## **TIMELINE:**

July 2015 - A Caterpillar Trencher used in the building of the Alaska Highway in 1942 was donated to the Peace Liard Regional Arts Council to be used for a public art sculpture.

December 2015 - The City of Dawson Creek gave approval in principle to the Peace Liard Regional Arts Council to have the public art sculpture displayed on the grounds of the National Alberta Railway (NAR) Park (Mile Zero) in Dawson Creek.

February 2016 - Trencher will be moved to its working site in Rolla (25 kms outside of Dawson Creek).

March 2016 - Meetings have been held between the three curators and advisor and in March, they will confirm the conceptual drawing for the public art sculpture.

April 2016 - Materials for the project will be sourced and secured.

May 2016 - April 2017 - The three curators and the advisor will work with local artists to carry out the creation of the public art sculpture.

May 2016 - April 2017 - The Executive Director of the PLRAC will work with the City of Dawson Creek to prepare the site of the sculpture's permanent location.

March 2017 - Promotion of the unveiling will begin; entertainers and attending officials/representatives will be confirmed; an event program will be produced, providing details of the project from its inception to completion.

May 2017 - Sculpture will be moved from its working site to its permanent location at the NAR Park (Mile Zero).

May 19, 2017 - Sculpture will be unveiled at the NAR Park and will be attended by City officials, tourism, museum, art groups, and donor representatives. Curators and advisor and participating artists will also be in attendance. The unveiling will open with a prayer by a local Elder and song by the Peace River Drummers, a local Indigenous drumming group. Entertainment will follow provided by those musicians who submitted songs to the Alaska Highway 75th Anniversary Theme Song Contest. We expect this event to attract hundreds of people and to serve as a signature events for the 2017 celebrations.

## **LONGEVITY AND MAINTENANCE OF OBJECT OVER THE LONG TERM**

By using the trencher as the framework for the sculpture, we see little if any deterioration over time. The trencher was built before 1942 and has been outside all of this time and is still in good condition. Additions and modifications to the trencher will consist largely of metals and welding and laser cutting techniques. By ensuring that all materials are durable enough to withstand the climate of northeast BC, like the trencher itself, these materials should show little deterioration over time.

## **FEASIBILITY AND SUCCESS OF PROJECT**

The framework of the sculpture, a Caterpillar Trencher, has already been donated to the Peace Liard Regional Arts Council. The City of Dawson Creek has already approved the location of the public art sculpture and has committed to in-kind support in preparing the site for the sculpture. We have identified appropriate funding sources to help with materials and artist honorariums, and we have ensured that our budget is clear and realistic. In addition to the support from the City of Dawson Creek, we have support from Indigenous groups and other organizations in our community, including the regional districts, tourism, museums, art gallery and art council groups. This support ranges from letters of support, to cash and in-kind donations, and volunteering.

The art project is being overseen by professional artists with a long history of creating large sculptural pieces (Emilie Mattson, Karl Mattson, and Brian Jungen). Working with a group of selected artists from across the Peace-Liard region, the concept of the piece will be planned out by the end of March, 2016. Work on the piece will begin in May 2016, giving artists a year to complete the project.

The PLRAC has been assisting local arts councils and artists for over 30 years and is well positioned to manage this project.