



First Nations Leadership Town Hall: Upcoming First Nations First Ministers Meeting

Summary Report



March 31, 2026



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Introduction

In December, Prime Minister Mark Carney committed to the AFN Special Chiefs Assembly that he would convene a First Ministers Meeting in 2026 to bring together First Nations with the Prime Minister and the Premiers.

The Prime Minister also committed that First Nations would drive the agenda. This commitment is welcome. But it did not happen by chance.

Prime Minister Carney's December promise to Chiefs builds on a commitment the AFN worked hard to get from the Premiers last summer- when the National Chief met with them in the days after Bill C-5 was rushed through Parliament.

Since the announcement, the AFN's Executive has met to discuss the opportunity and the best ways to engage Chiefs across the country in the months leading up to the First Minister's meeting.

The AFN has also hosted national forums on education (Vancouver), economic development (Montreal) and natural resource development (Calgary) to inform these plans.

As we did for the 2025 federal election and June's Bill C-5 debate, the AFN is hosting a virtual Town Hall series to provide Chiefs and leadership with an opportunity to strategize, ask questions and share perspectives.

The AFN convened a National Virtual Town Hall with First Nations leadership on March 11, 2026, to discuss the views of First Nations leadership on an agenda and approaches to the First Nations-First Ministers' Meeting FNFMM expected to take place later this year.

This report summarizes the first virtual town hall meeting discussion on March 11, 2026.

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Virtual Town Hall – Meeting Purpose

The purpose of the March 11 virtual town hall was to discuss the views of First Nations leadership on an agenda and approaches to the First Nations–First Ministers’ Meeting FNFMM expected to take place later this year. The Town Hall was the first in a planned series of virtual and in-person leadership discussions on this matter over the coming months. The primary objectives were:

- Begin identifying First Nations’ views and guidance on priority issues for the upcoming FNFMM
- Discuss issues such as proposed structure, preparations and follow-up protocols from the FNFMM
- Provide background information and lessons from some previous FMM experiences
- Apply feedback from the Town Hall to inform the development of technical position papers and a coordinated approach to the FNFMM.



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Opening Remarks from National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak

National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak recognized the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg people and thanked all participants for attending.

She recognized the experience of the panelists and provided a summary of the advocacy that led to the commitment from Premiers and the Prime Minister's agreement to participate in the First Ministers meeting on First Nations issues.

Since the Prime Minister's December announcement, the National Chief has had many conversations with Chiefs from coast-to-coast to coast. She has observed three common themes.

First, Chiefs are united in saying this national meeting can't be a "one-and-done." Reconciliation and practical solutions require ongoing dialogue and sustained approaches grounded in jurisdiction, ownership and a shared focus on prosperity for all.

That means establishing an ongoing federal-provincial accountability mechanism to ensure socio-economic gaps are addressed through deeds, not words.

Second, Chiefs have told us not to rush planning. That's why we're proposing the First Ministers conference convene in Ottawa later this fall. This will ensure we have time for regional engagement through the Spring and discussions at our AFN Annual General Assembly in July.

The Executive is not making any decisions about the First Ministers Meeting until we hear more from Chiefs.

Third, Chiefs have told National Chief that they see this national gathering as a historic opportunity to finally discuss solutions to jurisdictional challenges that have held back First Nation prosperity throughout this country's history.

Discrimination that has prevented First Nation children and families from enjoying the basics most Canadians take for granted. Clean water. Internet and cell phone access. Quality housing and modern schools. Basic health care and policing services.

National Chief Woodhouse Nepinak recognized Elders and a generation of great First Nation leaders that participated in the constitutional conferences in the 80s and the Kelowna Accord in 2005.

First Nations have come a long way since, but we all know there is unfinished business in this beautiful country. That long climb rests with all of us now.

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Panel Discussion: Lessons from Experience

The panel featured Gina Wilson (Kitigan Zibi Anishnaabeg), Chief Jeff Copenace (Ojibway's of Onigaming First Nation), and Harold Tarbell (Mohawk of Akwesasne). Each shared insights from their experience with First Ministers' Meetings, federal, provincial, and territorial processes, and First Nations–Crown engagements.

Among other things, the panelists discussed and answered questions regarding a variety of topics. Some key themes emerged:

- Real work happens before the FMM
- Relationships before and during the meeting matter
- Unity changes federal behaviour
- Precision beats rhetoric
- Secure the follow-through before you leave
- Push for next steps to have clear public reporting frameworks and clear implementation secretariats/leads
- Long-term change requires persistence beyond the first meeting

Panelists emphasized the importance of focus, discipline, pre-work, and follow-up. They offered some additional considerations for leadership:

- Limited speaking opportunities require focused preparation and lead-up work.
- Maintain discipline and focus on objectives.
- Avoid getting caught up in the fanfare and celebrity of the moment.
- Physical and logistical considerations matter. Room layout, seating, virtual participation and Ministerial representation can influence and shift conversations.
- Respect the diversity of nation-building and sovereignty approaches, as reflected in the AFN Charter.
- Reinforce unity. Avoid framing progress as zero-sum.
- Recognize the FNFMM as one step in ongoing government-to-government relationship building.



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Panelists discussed and answered questions about planning and execution of the Kelowna Accord meetings in 2004 and 2005. It was noted at the outset that the FMM meeting being planned for this year is just with First Nations leadership. Unlike the other Kelowna Accord discussions, Métis and Inuit representatives will not be in attendance.

Other Kelowna Accord-related discussion points include:

- The process was rooted in ceremony, with Elders providing important advice throughout.
- The process benefited from establishment of an oversight committee
- While there were limitations on the number of people in the room, there was an 'over-flow' space on-site for others to watch, participate in the activities and caucus.
- Importance of a team effort: Identify some key priorities for First Nations, connect with cabinet ministers and identify who will be in the room and speaking
- Issues had to be policy driven. Kelowna Accord targeted those most in need, and had policy targets in terms of closing the gap in education, investments in housing, etc.
- Champions and allies amongst the Premiers were identified early to help push this event to be a success and look for tangible investments
- Push government to have a strong First Nation team of officials. Encourage the Privy Council Office to have an Indigenous Affairs secretariat that will have the knowledge and expertise that is needed
- Even though Kelowna Accord consultations took 18 months and was supposed to be a 10-year process, it still felt rushed by dynamic of an upcoming federal election.
- Secure long-term commitments. Seek tangible investments.

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Panelist Summary

Plan and Prepare: Strategic planning and preparation in advance any FMM is critical to securing concrete outcomes and wins at the FMM. Preparation includes developing discussion papers, analyses, draft positions, implementation plans, leveraging existing political and bureaucratic relationships and processes, identifying potential allies, and planning for the structure of the meeting and possible outcomes in concrete, specific language that has the potential to be actioned.

Organize and Focus: Identify and prepare speakers to deliver focused messages on policy-driven issues, understand the nature and limits of FMMs, provide constructive solutions to steer the discussions the “how” rather than “whether”, focus on the messaging and not the fanfare of the event keeping in mind shared objectives to yield higher chance of success

Power of Unity: Unity strengthens negotiating power while fragmented perspectives results in stalling of progress on important issues due to perceived uncertainty

Follow-through: Identify clear successful outcomes/targets and secure follow-through to ensure progress after the meeting, advocate for transparent reporting frameworks, push for clear implementation leads/secretariats

Leadership Discussion: Emerging Themes

Chiefs and leaders shared many insightful and practical perspectives and considerations with each other. Discussion demonstrated strong interest among leadership to shape a successful meeting with First Ministers. Many emphasized the scale of preparation required.

Leadership stressed the importance of First Nations collaborating and speaking in a coordinated manner while acknowledging diverse realities, including Treaty and modern Treaty nations, remote communities, and First Nations facing states of emergency.

Open discussion by leadership on FNFMM preparation, process, protocols and structure included the following key points and suggestions to help guide next steps:

1. Emphasis on the importance of incorporating ceremony into the meeting process (including holding ceremony prior to the meeting and considering traditional practices such as a sacred fire supported by Elders and firekeepers)
2. Proper planning requires identifying and being unified around key priorities; and carrying out advocacy in advance with identified allies in the provinces and territories.



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3. Chiefs in each province and regional level should collaborate to identify their top priorities.
4. Designate regional speakers or spokespersons and preparing coordinated speaking notes to support focused interventions.
5. The importance of unity, clarity, timing, and precision in preparing for the meeting.
6. The need for a coordinated preparation process with clear objectives, structured agenda and First Nations leading the agenda-setting and meeting outcomes. Importance of inclusive participation, equitable speaking opportunities, and coordinated messaging grounded in unity and clarity.
7. Ensuring regional leadership teams meet ahead of future preparatory meetings to identify priorities and help shape agenda items, emphasizing the importance of confirming participation as timelines become clearer
8. Ensuring inclusive representation, including First Nations women, youth, and communities facing emergencies or crises.
9. The importance of clear and focused messaging on policy issues involving federal and provincial/territorial governments that have hindered progress for First Nations.
10. Creating accountability: Identifying targeted outcomes and transparent reporting mechanisms; working with intergovernmental secretariat on reporting and progress on outcomes.
11. Several participants suggested that focusing on a limited number of strategic priorities could strengthen First Nations' influence and improve the likelihood of achieving concrete outcomes.
12. Some suggested identifying a few key speakers (between 2-4 speakers) to deliver key messages with good speaking notes and identifying 2-4 key priorities for the FMM.
13. The need for more than one day for the FNFMM.

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FNFMM Agenda

The importance of coming together as Chiefs was emphasized to maximize this unprecedented opportunity for First Nations.

Discussion on approaches to agenda setting focused on key concerns of First Nations leadership, which could be discussed at this FMM and subsequent First Ministers and other ministerial level meetings. Some emphasized the importance of focusing on national/cross-cutting priorities rather than regional approaches or regional issues.

On setting the agenda for the upcoming FNFMM, participants identified several national issues:

- Lands and waters
- Infrastructure gap
- Safe drinking water and water protection
- Housing and infrastructure
- Justice reform
- Emergency Management
- Economic Development
- Action on Reconciliation
- Implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- Health and Social Transfer Agreements
- Treaty relationships



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Key Takeaways

- Once the agenda is determined, First Nations leadership should have very specific notes and points to raise and there should be identified speakers – to avoid a free-for-all dynamic.
- First Nations insist on occupying our rightful place, in all our diversity, in any "nation-building" efforts by federal, provincial and territorial governments. First Nations will continue to pursue First Nations priorities; and to protect and exercise their inherent rights, title, jurisdiction, sovereignty and Treaty rights.
- Solidarity among First Nations and ongoing leadership discussion are essential for identifying key common priorities to put forward for a First Nations-driven agenda for this unique First Nations FMM.
- Efforts should be made to develop shared key messages. Messaging must be supported by thorough policy and legal analysis, grounded in First Nations rights, jurisdiction and diversity.
- Leaders expect planning to continue. Shared positions can be developed through sustained leadership discussion (e.g. more leadership forums at the national and regional level including at the 2026 AFN AGA).
- The upcoming FNFMM should be the first, in a structured, ongoing multilateral process between First Nations leaders, federal, provincial and territorial First Ministers.
- Achieving meaningful outcomes in an ongoing FNFMM process will require detailed preparation and coordinated work and advocacy at all levels with a sustained focus on measurable outcomes, accountability, follow-through, and clear implementation mechanisms.
- Based on discussions to date, some common outstanding questions have emerged:
 - o What is the date of the meeting and where will it take place?
 - o Are funds available to facilitate regional engagement in the lead up to the meeting?
 - o What is the AFN's position regarding issues to be discussed?
 - o Will be the process regular meetings with federal and provincial representatives in the lead up to the meeting?
 - o Who will be able to attend?
 - o Will there be regional tables at the meeting?
- These will help guide AFN discussions with federal officials. Responses will be shared with leadership over the coming weeks as they are received and confirmed.

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Next Steps

The meeting concluded with the assurance that the AFN will seek answers to outstanding questions with the federal government and host regular virtual forums.

A second virtual meeting will be organized in early April to include the participation of technicians for advice and expertise.

The AFN Executive will meet to review feedback, discuss strategy and next steps.

The preparation of a communications strategy will be needed to keep leadership informed of the planning and the FNFMM event itself.



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Appendix A Glossary of Terms

This glossary of terms was provided by Gina Wilson as key terms used commonly in discussions and negotiations. She noted that while these terms are what you can expect to hear from federal officials, there exists an opportunity to decolonize these bureaucratic terms to be more First Nations-focused.

Glossary of Terms

Federal Provincial Territorial Indigenous Approach (FPTI)	A collaborative approach that brings together federal, provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments to coordinate priorities, align actions, and address shared issues
Intergovernmental Affairs (IGA)	The coordination and management of relationships, negotiations, and decision-making between different levels of government
First Ministers	The Prime Minister and the 13 provincial and territorial Premiers
Senior Officials	Prepare the negotiations, draft language, and resolve issues before leaders meet
Bilateral or Trilateral Meeting	A side meeting where two or three parties meet separately during the FMM period
Communiqué	The official written statement released after the meeting summarizing outcomes. Gina noted that consensus is often very difficult to achieve for a first meeting
Joint statement	A tool that can be used when leaders agree on some (not all) issues
Penholders	Parties responsible for drafting communiqué or joint statement
Opt-Out	A clause allowing a party to decline participation (e.g. Province declining participation in a national program)
Landing Zone	A compromise position leaders can accept
Lines in the Sand	Hardline positions that parties say they will not move from
Parking Lot	Issues temporarily set aside
Intervention Round	A structured discussion on an agenda item



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