

Twenty-five candidates – a record number – will run for seven seats on the band council of the tiny, troubled Mohawk community northwest of Montreal

Wide-open race in Kanesatake

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They all want to get elected. All six current chiefs. A fired police chief. An elder who was once grand chief. A woman who threatened to burn down another grand chief's house.

And more.

A record 25 candidates will run for seven seats on the band council of tiny, troubled Kanesatake, the rural Mohawk community of almost 1,700 voters 50 kilometres northwest of Montreal.

The July 12 election will be the most widely contested since the voting system was introduced there in 1991.

But one prominent name will be missing from the ballot. Steven Bonspille, the feisty leader who has been the grand chief since 2005, has bowed out.



Steven Bonspille (left), who has served as Kanesatake's grand chief, will not seek re-election. Sohenrise Paul Nicholas (right) is the only one of 25 candidates who has Bonspille's support for the vote in the Mohawk community on July 12.

"The last three years have been very trying - they were a big challenge," said Bonspille, who moved out of Kanesatake to the neighbouring village of Oka a year ago to get some peace for himself and his young family.

"The community is ready for change, and I think the people should have a whole new council in there and get some new blood, some new vision," he said this week from his home.

Three people are running to replace Bonspille, who has served on council for the last seven years, first as a chief (the equivalent of a councillor) and then as grand chief (similar to a mayor).

Only one candidate for grand chief has his "100-per-cent" endorsement: Sohenrise Paul Nicholas, a Mohawk with a commerce degree from Concordia University who manages the Bank of Montreal in Akwesasne, near Cornwall, Ont.

The other two aspirants for the grand chief job couldn't be more different: Clarence Simon, a well-known elder on the current council, and political neophyte Veronica Montour, a Mohawk traditionalist. Bonspille backs Nicholas.

"He's exactly what Kanesatake needs - he'll do a very good job," said Bonspille, whose younger brother, Victor, is also running for a seat on the band council.

Nicholas used to be president of Kanesatake's local economic development corporation. He moved on after the current council took over in the last election, in 2005.

"The politics in Kanesatake are a little bit unique - we work by consensus, and that's how my name came up to run for grand chief," said Nicholas, 35, who lives in the community and would have to quit his job in Akwesasne if elected.

He hasn't held office before.

"The electoral system hasn't been around here long. It's new to us. It's a work in progress for everyone," he said.

The last election showed the hazards of abiding by the ballot. Victory was bittersweet for Bonspille. It left him burdened by an entire council of adversaries: six chiefs, including Simon, who had been allies of Bonspille's controversial predecessor, James Gabriel, and who had run as a slate.

Gabriel had fled Kanesatake in January 2004 after a huge police raid he authorized to fight the local drug trade turned into a fiasco. Funded with a special \$900,000 federal grant, the raid failed after rioters surrounded the police station and forced the police to leave.

The event rocked the community, and its aftermath wasn't pretty.

Official police presence in the community was disrupted for months after the raid. A long criminal trial resulted in multiple convictions of Kanesatake residents for arson, rioting and other offences. Legal bills piled up and the community limped along under federal trusteeship while forensic auditors began investigating spending excesses under Gabriel's reign.

In the end, the audits raised more questions than they answered. Still in turmoil, Kanesatake continues to absorb millions of dollars in taxpayers' money from Quebec and Ottawa.

Now comes a new election and a chance to shake up the community's power base once again.

Nominations closed last Friday. Besides the current chiefs - one of whom, Raymond Gabriel, has decided to distance himself by running as an independent this time - 16 other candidates are vying for jobs on the new council.

Among the better known are:

- Tracy Cross, the acting chief of Kanesatake's police force who was fired after the 2004 raid and was later sanctioned by Quebec's Police Ethics Committee for secretly investigating Gabriel in 1997.
- Deborah (Chicky) Etienne, who was convicted of threatening to burn Gabriel's house during the 2004 riot.
- Keith Cree, who received a conditional discharge after being found guilty of unlawful assembly during the riot.
- Sonya Gagnier and Brenda Etienne, two ex-Kanesatake civilian police commissioners who also had high profiles during the events in 2004.
- Michael David, nephew of Joseph (Stonecarver) David, who was shot and paralyzed in a siege of his house by Kanesatake police in 1999 and who died five years later;
- And finally, Hugh Nicholas, an elder who was grand chief in the 1980s.

Bonspille won't be back – not yet, anyway. "Politics takes its toll on a guy," he said, explaining why he's not running. "Seven years of Kanesatake politics is like 20 years anywhere else. It's so rough and tumble."

Bonspille used to live right across the street from the band council offices, in the heart of the territory. Now he and his partner, Isabelle, are raising their three sons in Oka, away from the hubbub.

"I've got more peace in my life, because I don't have people at my door day and night," he said.

"I'm not ruling out coming back sometime in the future, but right now I need to follow another path."

The election for the Kanesatake council is to be held July 12. There's an advance poll July 5; mail-in balloting and a mobile poll also are being organized. There are 1,685 eligible voters, 1,044 in Kanesatake and 641 outside. For information, phone 514-479-1346.