

## VOICES

# Chief Harvey Yesno

One of CIM Magazine's 2022 Names to Know

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Chief Harvey Yesno, board member, Avalon Advanced Materials. Courtesy of Chief Harvey Yesno

Chief Harvey Yesno and Donald Bubar first met 20 years ago as panelists focused on development opportunities in northwestern Ontario. At the time, Chief Yesno was representing the interests of the Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund, which provides financing and business support to Indigenous businesses in northern Ontario. Then, as now, Bubar was CEO and president of Avalon Advanced Materials.

Today, Yesno, a former Chief of the Eabametoong First Nation, past director of community relations for Ontario's Ring of Fire Secretariat and Grand Chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation is the newest member of Avalon's board of directors. Avalon has interests across Canada, but currently, the company's focus is squarely on Ontario, and specifically on its Separation Rapids lithium project near Kenora, which the company hopes will produce industrial lithium-mineral products for glass-ceramics and lithium chemicals for energy storage, as well as its Lilypad cesium-tantalum project near Fort Hope, which includes 14 claims totalling 3,108 hectares of cesium, tantalum and lithium-rich granitic pegmatites. Even before joining the Avalon board, Chief Yesno was familiar with Lilypad, as it is located on the traditional lands of the Eabametoong First Nation.

Chief Yesno recognizes that his current position at Avalon represents something new and uncommon – participation of Indigenous members on executive boards. A 2020 Statistics Canada report on publicly traded companies in Canada found that only 1.7 per cent have at least one Indigenous person on their board of directors, while a 2021 report by Corporations Canada found that Indigenous members hold a mere 0.3 per cent of board seats.

The clincher for Chief Yesno to accept the board appointment was the opportunity to advocate for First Nations in a novel way. "I thought this was a good opportunity for me to sit at a different table and continue to advocate, promote or even educate people who maybe don't understand some of the processes that First Nations go through and that are often misunderstood as maybe 'anti-development' or 'too slow.'"

For Chief Yesno, the appointment is not about technical expertise, but recognizing his experience, and knowledge of consultation processes in Indigenous communities – knowledge he gained, in part, through four decades of volunteering and participating in other panels and task forces. "Some of the things that I had been advocating for – how to create certainty, engagement and decision-making processes in the community – I think that could be beneficial to companies," he explained, highlighting cultural practices such as consensus-driven decision-making rather than majority rules and translating technical terms into local languages and dialects as examples of the lessons he brings to the table.

While Indigenous participation on boards may not be common now, Chief Yesno expects to see that change in the future. Until then, he is going to do his best to represent First Nations' interests.

"I'm not saying I have all the answers, but I'm willing to share what I have gained in terms of experience and knowledge because, if it's going to help First Nations participate in not only the industry but also in the economy [overall], I think that's going to be good for everyone."