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Brenda Chisholm-Beaton  
Mayor – Town of Port Hawkesbury  
606 Reeves Street, Port Hawkesbury NS B9A 2R7

February 17, 2024

Dear Rolf,

**RE: Friends United Impact on Community**

I write this letter as both a thank you and as an acknowledgement of the tremendous positive impact that Friends United and the work that you have done with your team and with Friends United artists to progress our **Strait Area** and **Cape Breton Unama’kik** Communities. Friends United as a centre promotes Indigenous art, culture, and artifacts, and creates an inclusive and welcoming space for Indigenous artists to create, it also creates an inclusive, safe, and welcoming environment for our communities to be active participants in truth and reconciliation. The work you and your team do within the beautiful Friends United space and in the community at large is actually “Reconcili-ACTION” and I hope this letter will demonstrate why I believe that to be true.

It is difficult to articulate in words the welcoming and inclusive space that greets visitors when entering the Friends United facility; I am immediately stricken by the beauty of Indigenous art, artifacts, culture, ambiance, and design. I knew from my very first visit that this is a place like no other. In my time as Mayor since 2016, I have visited numerous times and in various capacities. I would like to share how Friends United has lent itself as a site for Reconcili-ACTION”

In 2016 a group of likeminded leaders primarily made up of women from First Nation local government, municipal local government, and from community and provincial boards came together to form Government FOCUS (Female Objectives Cape Breton Unama’kik Strait) with a focus on promoting and increasing women’s participation in leadership roles. Key to this work was truth and reconciliation and for the first time in history for our region, and we suspect in Canada, women in Indigenous and local government came together to work on gender equity for both political and non-political leadership roles in our region. This important work needed to start with Mi’kmaq grandmothers, who traditionally are the holders of knowledge and who also need to do important work to reclaim their matriarchal roles as leaders.

Over the past 8 years we have been fortunate to host these Mi'kmaq Grandmother gatherings at Friends United, and it's my belief that this important work would not have had the same impact were it done elsewhere. I am so grateful to you Rolf for generously providing this safe and inclusive space for this work. I am proud when I visit Friends United to see the artist renderings of this work displayed on site, as a reminder that Indigenous women and all women are leaders and take work together for a better balance at leadership tables in our communities, in our Province and in our Country of Canada.

I also wanted to show my gratitude for another form of Friends United "Reconcili-ACTION" I've witnessed; yes, the Friends United site is a wonderful testament to Indigenous art culture and heritage however you and your team has found multiple ways to transcend the work you do beyond the physical location. For example, when we celebrated a major milestone in Truth and Reconciliation in the Town of Port Hawkesbury last Spring, marked by the permanent raising of the Mi'kmaq Nation flag, the Friends United team was instrumental in this two-day celebration. The Indigenous art displayed at the Port Hawkesbury Civic Centre, your participation in the design and implementation of our ceremony and following Mawiomi celebration, and your participation both before and after that event was so integral. Thank you! We continue to receive daily comments from all visitors to the Civic Centre about how amazing it is to see such beautiful artwork and how great it is to see the Mi'kmaq Nation flag flying permanently in our Town.

Truth and Reconciliation requires action to make it impactful, meaningful, and to make positive change to unite our communities in peace and friendship and understanding. I can honestly say that Friends United, your team, and all the work that you have done and that you will do is critical to this goal on our Island, both on and off location. On location I've attended Mi'kmaq gatherings, Mi'kmaq ceremonies, political meetings, fundraising events, educational retreats (were I to have enough time I'd detail how amazing it was to host the Saint Francis Xavier Coady Institute students at Friends United twice to discuss the important work of truth and reconciliation), and so much more. Off location, I can clearly see the positive fingerprints of Friends United displayed in local businesses in the form of art and artifacts, and in community centres and buildings, including the Port Hawkesbury Civic Centre.

Thank you, Rolf, and thank you to your team at Friends United for your ongoing support and dedication to truth and reconciliation and for putting that into practice with action. It would be impossible to measure the impact Friends United has had on our communities in the Strait Cape Breton Unama'kik region and beyond - only to say that our communities are better, more inclusive, and more welcoming to absolutely everyone, regardless of age, nationality, gender, or even level of ability as a result. It is my pleasure to write this letter as a testament of my gratitude as both Mayor of Port Hawkesbury and as co-chair of Government FOCUS.

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Mayor Brenda Chisholm-Beaton

Town of Port Hawkesbury

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In closing, please continue to move the needle on truth and reconciliation in all that you do both on and offsite. I am so pleased to have had the opportunity to collaborate with Friends United over the past 8 years and very much look forward to more years into the future.

In friendship,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B Chisholm-Beaton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Brenda Chisholm-Beaton  
Mayor, Town of Port Hawkesbury