

Maa-nulth Nations celebrate treaty signing

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Representatives of the federal government signed the historic Maa-nulth Final Agreement at an emotional ceremony at Alberni Athletic Hall on Thursday.

The 1950s-era basketball hall was decorated with huge ceremonial curtains from the five Barkley Sound Nations, Huu-ay-aht, Ucluelet, Toquaht, Uchucklesaht and Kyuquot-Checklesah, and the air was alive with traditional songs and drumming. Following opening prayers in the Nuu-chah-nulth language and welcoming addresses by the host nations, federal Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl acknowledged the historic significance of the signing.

"You fully appreciate the role of the Maa-nulth Final Agreement - this is the beginning of the end of the Indian Act," he said, to a round of cheers and spontaneous drumming.

Under the terms of the treaty, the five nations will receive 24,550 hectares of land on fee simple basis, plus cash transfers totalling \$73.1 million over 10 years, plus annual resource revenue payments and \$10.3 million per year to implement the treaty. Strahl noted that the agreement also recognizes the traditional governance model of the Nuu-chah-nulth people.

Huu-ay-aht chief councillor Robert Dennis said the system of hereditary chiefs - Hawiiah - remains critical.

"That governance has never left HUU-AY-AHT," Dennis said. "That is a very important institution for us. That institution has survived some very difficult time and some very difficult challenges." Dennis credits successive HUU-AY-AHT Hawiiah with calling for change, and calling for healthy communities. That will mean re-establishing the Nuu-chah-nulth language and encouraging more aboriginal children to complete their education, he said.

"I believe we have a very bright future," Dennis said. "But we only see this treaty as a set of tools - not a silver platter." The cash and the resources will provide great opportunities, but also pose great challenges, he warned.

"If it doesn't work, there's a lot of people outside that door who are waiting for us to fail," he said. "We have to decide that, yes we can create a better future for our nation."

Speaking on behalf of the other four Maa-nulth Nations, Uchucklesaht chief councillor Charlie Cootes said the treaty has ensured that the cultural and economic welfare of the Maa-nulth people will be protected.

"We recognize that today, we, as First Nations, as B.C. and Canadian citizens, are here to stay, and this treaty gives us the certainty of peaceful co-existence," he said.



CREDIT: Shayne Morrow/AV Times
Federal Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl (centre), flanked by federal negotiator Eric Denhoff (left) and HUU-AY-AHT chief councillor Robert Dennis, holds the Maa-nulth Final Agreement aloft.

B.C. Assembly of First Nations chief Shawn Atleo, of Ahousaht First Nation, extended the thought even further.

"This is not just a gift to the Maa-nulth Nations. This is a gift to the people of Canada," Atleo said. "We are all throwing off the yoke of colonial oppression."



The province signed its own Final Agreement with Maa-nulth in 2008, but provincial Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation Minister Mike de Jong was not to be out-done. In his own inimitable style, de Jong announced that the province would immediately begin the transfer of six parcels of land to the Maa-nulth Nations (SEE STORY).

"Folks, we are getting on with it - we're paddling in the same direction," de Jong said. "I think we've learned how powerful we are when we're all working together. We're going to do this together and it is going to be great."

de Jong's bubbly address prompted emcee Angela Wesley to observe, "I thought he was going to break into song."

Following the ceremony, Strahl refuted the idea that the treaty confers special status on First Nations.

"They've said, 'What do we want? We want opportunities for economic development. We want to stand shoulder to shoulder with you. We want to be part of the regional districts and help make decisions'," Strahl said. "We're not re-writing the Constitution - we're giving certainty to it. The constitution recognizes that aboriginal people were here first."