

Maa-nulth land transfers jump-start development plans



By Shayne Morrow, Alberni Valley Times
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Maa-nulth First Nation leaders are hoping the early transfer of provincial Crown land packages will provide a head start while they are waiting for implementation of their treaty.

On April 9, the federal government signed off on the Maa-nulth Final Agreement, which cedes land, cash and resource rights to the five Barkley Sound nations: Huu-ay-aht, Ucluelet, Toquaht, Uchucklesaht and Kyuquot-Checklesaht.

And in a move that came as a surprise to many, provincial aboriginal Relations Minister Mike de Jong announced the early transfer of six land parcels, in advance of implementation, which will likely take place in July 2010.

Ucluelet chief councillor Vi Mundy said the deal proceeded quietly behind the scenes.

"Our nation had been talking to the B.C. government for a while," Mundy said. The Ucluelet package is a 34-hectare parcel adjacent Pacific Rim National Park Reserve.

Mundy said the idea of an early transfer gained impetus after the province signed an incremental treaty agreement with nearby Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation.

"We said, 'We negotiated a treaty and we have to wait two years'," she said, adding that things started to speed up after that.

The last hurdle was the resolution of the Nuu-chah-nulth Fisheries court action, which the Huu-ay-aht First Nation was waiting on.

Huu-ay-aht chief councillor Robert Dennis said the land transfer did come as a surprise to him, although he knew there had been some advance discussions. The Huu-ay-aht parcel is 31.5 hectares on the north shore of Grappler Inlet, adjacent to Bamfield. But politics could still scupper the deal, he added.

"It was already identified as treaty settlement land," Dennis said. "It's a memorandum of understanding (MOU) right now - and they'll work on it if they're (Liberals) re-elected.

"MOUs don't carry much weight in the event of a change of government. That would be a concern of mine. I've seen binding agreements ripped up when a new government comes in."

Dennis said he will press the NDP leadership to confirm their support (or lack of support) for the Maa-nulth Final Agreement and the early land transfers.

Mundy said her nation will press ahead on its development plans.

"We're already working with the Village of Ucluelet," she said.

The First Nation and the municipality have made great strides in emerging from the shadow of Tofino, she added.

"People used to come here from Tofino and say, 'We didn't know Ucluelet was here'," she said. "Now we're finally on the map. We're becoming a drawing card on our own."

For that reason, she said the two will work in close concert to create compatible developments.

On the other hand, Ucluelet First Nation doesn't have an active partnership with any of the other four Maa-nulth Nations.

"There may be a time when we can join a partnership, but right now, what we're concentrating on is for our own nation," Mundy said. "Our door is always open," she added.

Dennis said Huu-ay-aht will take the same good-neighbour approach, to ensure the best development for the greater community.

Dennis said Huu-ay-aht will go through a community consultation on land-use planning, to identify best uses for the new property. That should take about three months, he said.

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