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Tsawwassen aboriginals say treaty vote raises hopes for prosperous future

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DELTA, B.C. (CP) - The timing for a treaty is perfect for the tiny Tsawwassen First Nation who call the fertile lands and ocean waters of the Fraser River delta near Vancouver home, says one of the aboriginal nation's few homegrown businesspeople.

"This is a very good move right now," said Tony Jacobs, who runs a construction contracting business.

"Ten years ago it might have been too early and 10 years from now it would be too late. On the economic scale, the outlook for our nation looks very promising."

Jacobs and other members of the Tsawwassen First Nation were voting Wednesday on what is poised to be the first urban aboriginal land-claims treaty in British Columbia.

The majority of the band's 300 members were expected to vote to give up their tax-exempt status in exchange for some of the richest and most protected farmland in Canada.

The current construction boom in British Columbia, Vancouver's hosting of the 2010 Olympics and the likely expansion of the port facility that borders Tsawwassen lands all bring promises of improved opportunities and prosperity for the band, Jacobs said.

"For a treaty you have to have good economics so that we can guarantee our own future and achieve our own goals and objectives. That's what it's about," he said.

The Tsawwassen First Nation website indicates the band members currently face economic challenges.

The average annual family income on the reserve is \$20,005, compared to \$67,844 in neighbouring Delta.

Forty per cent of the Tsawwassen people are either on welfare or some other form of social assistance and the unemployment rate is 38 per cent. The high school graduation rate is 47 per cent.

Jacobs said he employs 10 band members and is convinced the treaty, if ratified, will result in a business expansion for himself and others.

"I look forward to busier times ahead," said Jacobs, a former elected band chief and councillor. He said he also serves as the nation's fisheries manager.

Last December, federal, provincial and Tsawwassen aboriginal negotiators initialled a tentative treaty settlement after- years of talks.

The deal will give the Tsawwassen 724 hectares of land, about \$35 million in cash and program start-up funds, fish deals that cover commercial and ceremonial catches of Fraser River salmon, special tax status and a seat at Vancouver's regional government board.

The B.C. government's decision to take 207 hectares of land protected from development under an agricultural land reserve and put it in the treaty package caused fierce debate among neighbouring communities. Many fear the farmland will be paved to become part of a container port facility.

The importance of Wednesday's vote carries the weight of more than \$1 billion tax dollars already spent negotiating treaties under the cumbersome, tri-government process that began about 15 years ago with lofty promises.

Fewer than 20 of British Columbia's almost 200 aboriginal nations have signed treaties and any that were signed were signed more than 150 years ago when the province was governed as a British colony.

The only modern-day land-claims treaty in British Columbia was signed in '98 with the Nisga'a Nation of northwest B.C. The Nisga'a treaty was reached after more than 100 years of on-again, off-again negotiations between the aboriginals and various Canadian governments.

On Saturday, the first of five treaty votes will be held on Vancouver Island in what could become the second successful treaty in British Columbia.

The Huu-ay-aht First Nation, who live near Bamfield on the west coast of the island, will vote on a land and cash offer from the federal and provincial governments. The vote results are expected to be announced Sunday.

The four other Vancouver Island nations, who negotiated the treaty as the Maa-nulth First Nations, will vote at later dates.

Jacobs said he expects a heavy turnout for the Tsawwassen vote. He said he supports the treaty.

He said there is a mood of anticipation and excitement in the community.
