

Treaty opens up a world of opportunity for First Nation

BY JUDITH LAVOIE, TIMES COLONIST APRIL 8, 2011

The soaring roofline of the new Huu-ay-aht First Nation administration building radiates symbolism for a band breaking free from the Indian Act and embarking on an ambitious economic development program.

The \$5-million building, on a bluff overlooking the curve of Pacheena Bay and village of Anacla, will officially open today with a celebration banquet for about 500 people.

Then it's back to honing economic strategies and ironing out wrinkles in new laws, enacted April 1 when the Maa-Nulth treaty took effect.

"This building is the heart of our economic development," said Chief Councillor Robert Dennis, admiring his office and looking out at a reception area resembling a mix of luxury hotel and airport.

The aim is good governance and separation of band politics and business, Dennis said. "We bring in the best guys and they bring in their best people. We run the businesses as businesses and use the profit to have a social agenda," he said.

Stan Coleman, with a background in forestry, is CEO of Huu-ay-aht Development Corp. "It's a well-planned, well set-up business structure," said Coleman, who is responsible for tourism development, leased-out fishing licences, aquaculture, a gravel pit and an established forestry business with a total annual allowable cut of about 87,000 cubic metres.

"We're looking at moving ahead with the micro-hydro project on Sarita Lake. That's about a \$17-million investment," Coleman said.

Work has already started on a 51-lot subdivision and sewer system.

The territory is ideally situated to attract tourists and Coleman wants a pilot project showing Huu-ay-aht culture from the water to be running by the end of May.

Expanding tourism brings up the fraught question of the lengthy unpaved, logging roads leading to Bamfield.

"Our objective is to get enough attention from government to get that road paved," Coleman said.

The Maa-Nulth Treaty includes five Vancouver Island First Nations. Huu-ayaht, the largest band, with 682 members, will receive 1,077 hectares of former reserve land, 7,187 hectares of additional land, \$22 million over 10-years, \$350,000 projected annual resource sharing revenues and \$2.2 million annually in program funding.

In an area struggling to attract tourism and cope with fishing industry downturns, it is a welcome injection.

The aim is to work with Bamfield residents to bring in tourists and fishermen, said Dennis, acknowledging concern about Transport Canada transferring the Bamfield East dock to Huu-ay-aht.

Nothing will change for locals except the dock will be made more attractive, Dennis said, surveying the slightly ramshackle wharves.

Most Bamfield residents hope the treaty will spark an economic bounce. Cultural tourism would be a great addition, said John Mass of Broken Island Adventures, which offers kayaking and marine wildlife tours. "The Europeans are crazy for anything First Nations," he said. "By using their artwork and history it would help rejuvenate the town."

Further down the West Bamfield boardwalk, at the General Store, there was muted uncertainty.

"We don't really know what's in it," said Brian McKay of McKay Bay Lodge. "We all get along extremely well. I just hope the politicians are not putting a huge rift in the community."

Pat Byers, Bamfield Chamber of Commerce president, is optimistic. "I think it will help. It has got to bring people in," he said.

For Huu-ay-aht the change is summed up in a newly carved sign on the road leading to Bamfield.

"Welcome to our territory," it says. "Owners for 10,000 years. Stewards again after 150 years. Please treat our children's inheritance with respect."

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