Island first nation approves treaty

Four other bands in negotiating group vote this fall

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The Huu-ay-aht First Nation of the west coast of Vancouver Island has become the second band in the province to ratify a treaty under the B.C. treaty process.

The 615-member band, which has its home village at Pachena Bay near Bamfield, voted 90 per cent in favour of adopting the Maa-Nulth treaty Sunday. Of the 303 eligible Huu-ay-aht who voted, 272 approved the document that will grant the band self-government and 8,258 hectares of land, as well as cash, access to fisheries, forestry and other economic opportunities the band values at $145 million.

The vote comes less than a week after Tsawwassen First Nation in Delta voted to ratify the first treaty negotiated under the commission.

"I'm really ecstatic," Huu-ay-aht Chief Councillor Robert Dennis said Sunday.

The Maa-Nulth are a bargaining group that includes four other first nations on the west coast of the Island - the Ka:'yu:'k't'h'/Che:k'tles7et'h', Toquaht, Uchucklesaht and Ucluelet. In total, the proposed treaty with the provincial and federal governments would see a capital transfer of $73.1 million, annual resource royalty payments for use of Crown lands averaging $1.2 million for 25 years and a land transfer totalling almost 25,000 hectares to the five first nations.

If the rest of the bands ratify the treaty, and votes are scheduled for October, the B.C. legislature and Canadian Parliament would to pass enabling legislation. It is likely to be 2010 before the treaty takes effect.

"I never get overconfident," said Dennis of the remaining votes. "But I'm sure going to pluck away [at the other bands] and help them in whatever way I can."

Reaction to the vote was overwhelmingly positive.

"The Huu-ay-aht First Nation has taken a very important step," said Premier Gordon Campbell. "Hopefully, the other four First Nations of the Maa-Nulth Treaty will follow suit."

Campbell said he hopes the treaty would close the gaps between aboriginal and non-aboriginal British Columbians. The Huu-ay-aht, he added, have a bright future.

"This is a very good signal," said Jack Weisgerber, a commissioner with the B.C. Treaty Commission assigned to the Maa-Nulth Treaty table since negotiations began. "I'm quite excited by the fact that we have the second [treaty] passed, and quite resoundingly."

University of Victoria professor Michael Prince, an expert in social policy, said there are flaws in the B.C. Treaty Commission process, but at least it's a way for first nations to move forward.

Dennis hopes the treaty - with its economic spinoffs and stability - will encourage band members to return home. Currently about 120 people live on the reserve. The band is already working on a new subdivision and unveiled plans last week for a new administration building.

A land management plan has to be worked out for the Huu-ay-aht's new lands, and citizenship and government acts will need to be written.

The first task for the team that has been working on the treaty is to finalize the band's wealth management plan, a document that will lay out how the band will manage treaty funds, and develop an investment strategy so that the Huu-ay-aht will maintain their wealth over the long term. Dennis said he admires the investments made by the Nisga'a of northwestern B.C., after they signed a treaty. (It was done outside the B.C. Treaty Commission process).

"They put their money away and turned their $200 million into $300 million," Dennis said.

Some other economic initiatives that Dennis and other band leaders are looking at include developing a historical village site and working with Parks Canada to expand hiking trails, and expanding tourism.
CanWest News Service, with files from Judith Lavoie