

Feds to sign Maa-nulth treaty today

Shayne Morrow, Alberni Valley Times; with files from the Westerly

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The Maa-nulth Treaty will make one more step forward today when the federal government signs off on the long-awaited agreement today in Port Alberni.

In October 2007, the province and the five Maa-nulth partners -- Huu-ay-aht, Kyuquot-Checklesah, Toquaht, Ucluelet and Uchucklesah -- formally ratified the treaty, which provides cash and resource royalties, land, and self-government status to the Barkley Sound nations.

Huu-ay-aht chief councillor Robert Dennis said Ottawa moved quickly on the signing, following the resolution of one outstanding issue.

BC Premier Gordon Campbell (left, background) presents a ceremonial canoe to the five Maa-nulth First Nations Chiefs and their entourage in the rotunda of the BC Legislature to celebrate the introduction of the Maa-nulth First Nations Treaty Settlement Legislation Nov. 21, 2007. The federal government will ratify the treaty at a signing ceremony in Port Alberni today.

"We were waiting for the conclusion of the NTC (Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council) fisheries case [in B.C. Supreme Court]. The arguments concluded in March," Dennis said.

The ceremony is taking place at Athletic Hall, according to a spokesperson from the provincial Ministry for Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation. Minister Mike de Jong will attend, as will federal Indian and Northern Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl.

The Maa-nulth agreement arose from the ashes of the failed NTC Treaty agreement-in-principle (AIP) of 2001, when the late George Watts proposed the five Barkley Sound nations, who voted to approve the AIP, band together at a stripped-down negotiating table.

"That was one of the best decisions we ever made, to work with George," Dennis said. "This has been 15 years of in-the-trenches negotiations, and we feel comfortable where we are now."

That being said, now the hard work begins, Dennis said.

"What it means, at least for Huu-ay-aht First Nation, is that we get down to the real nitty-gritty of putting our own treaty plans into effect," Dennis said. "We can start some capacity-building initiatives, create some employment opportunities, and start building some infrastructure."

That includes both a new administration building and a housing complex in the Huu-ay-aht village of Anacla, at Pachena Bay.

"We'll be turning the soil in late spring or early summer on the administration building," Dennis said, noting that the housing project should follow on closely.

Vi Mundy, of the Ucluelet First Nation, said they will use the approximately 18 months-to-two years before the effective date of the treaty to get their own laws in order -- such as their citizenship and financial codes.

"There's quite a bit of work that needs to be done," she said. "It's good to have more time."

The Maa-nulth settlement includes \$73.1 million in cash, annual resource revenue payments averaging \$1.2 million for 25 years and a land package including nearly 25,000 hectares. The total agreement, which includes hunting and fishing allotments, could be worth as much as \$500 million.



In exchange, the Maa-nulth people will surrender their non-taxable status after 12 years.

The feds, the province and the Maa-nulth will be meeting to discuss the treaty's effective date, which will come once it passes through all the federal legislative processes.

"The effective date will likely be in July 2010," Dennis said.