

The Province - Tsawwassen article

Wednesday » July 25 » 2007

Tsawwassen band approves land treaty

By John Bermingham
The Province

Thursday, July 26, 2007

The first urban land treaty between a B.C. native band and the provincial and federal governments was struck last night.

"Our members were very brave," said Tsawwassen band Chief Kim Baird. "They have decided that this treaty is our way forward."

Almost three-quarters of the 180 band members who voted were in favour of the deal giving the band 207 hectares of farmland currently in the Agricultural Land Reserve. The treaty is worth \$120 million to the band and includes \$20 million in cash.

"This was a hard-fought vote," Baird said. "But now we have to put it behind us. Now, more than ever, we're going to have to work together to implement the treaty."

The band has made no secret of its interest in doing a deal with Deltaport to house the expanding Roberts Bank port terminal's container storage and warehouse facility.

Local opponents such as Tory MP John Cummins have said the deal will bring environmental risks to the band. He has also been critical of the treaty's Fraser sockeye-catch allocation as too generous.

Back in the 1990s, the Tsawwassen band rankled local residents when it built the Tsatsu Shores condo development on band land.

The band will now set up its own legislature to run its government and set laws, and the band can sit on the GVRD. It pulls out of the Indian Act, and so loses its tax-exempt status.

The B.C. government has long viewed this treaty as critical to the success of the B.C. treaty process.

The B.C. Treaty Commission has spent 15 years in talks, and racked up a \$1-billion bill for the feds, province and natives, but hasn't completed a single treaty. In fact, Victoria was so keen to get the Tsawwassen vote through that it spent \$400,000 on communications to sell the treaty to the band. The province also chartered a plane last week, so that 100 members of the Tsawwassen and Maa-Nulth could view Nisga'a self-government. Tsawwassen elders will receive \$15,000 for the yes vote, and band members will each get a smaller bonus. Many band members make around \$20,000 a year.

On Saturday, the 600-strong Huu-ay-aht First Nation on the west coast of Vancouver Island will vote to ratify its treaty.

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- with a file from David Carrigg