

Vancouver Sun - Tsawwassen

Tsawwassen approve first urban treaty

Band members vote 130 to 50 for controversial agreement with governments
Larry Pynn, Vancouver Sun

Published: Thursday, July 26, 2007

The Tsawwassen First Nation moved out from behind the shadows of the BC Ferries terminal in south Delta Wednesday to ratify the province's first modern urban treaty with senior governments. Band members voted 130 to 50 in favour of the treaty; only a simple majority was required for it to pass.

A jubilant Chief Kim Baird, speaking at the reserve recreation hall immediately after the vote, said the band has been working on the treaty since 1993.

"It's been a long haul," she told reporters.

"I'm very relieved, ecstatic that there is such strong support from the community for the treaty." Premier Gordon Campbell said in a phone interview that the results were a vote of confidence in the Tsawwassen band leadership and in the treaty process.

"It's always difficult being the first people out of the gate," he said. "My congratulations to the Tsawwassen people."

Delta Mayor Lois Jackson congratulated Baird for the victory, but said she remained disappointed at the provincial and federal governments for negotiating the treaty in secrecy with little involvement of the municipal government.

"That's the worst part of this entire exercise," she said.

Chief federal negotiator Tim Koepke said he was very pleased at the outcome and the treaty will now require the passage of provincial and federal legislation.

The vote finally represented a victory for the province's costly and beleaguered treaty process. Tsawwassen band member Ruth Adams has four daughters, 18 grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren. But when she enthusiastically voted in favour of the treaty on Wednesday, she did so with the memories of her ancestors uppermost in mind.

"They died poor, had a hard time," she said in an interview outside the treaty voting booth in the band's recreation centre.

"For me it's the honour of my ancestors, that's the big thing. They died without any acknowledgement. Look at this beautiful land, look at Delta and what it has."

Adams, 64, is an elder who stands to receive immediately \$15,000 from a yes vote; other younger band members receive \$1,000 later.

"The first thing I need is a dishwasher," she said with a laugh. Then she pointed to her tired Oldsmobile Cutlass Cruiser, adding: "And one of the doors on my station wagon is broken." Adams sees a positive future of economic self-sufficiency for her band, free from the ties of the federal Indian Act. "Now we are free to make our own choices for prosperity. We're open for business and want to participate like anyone else. We're going from welfare to work."

"I want our children to be proud of this treaty. It took a lot of work. This is David and Goliath." Members of the Tsawwassen First Nation had a choice between ratifying B.C.'s first modern urban treaty or dealing a crippling blow to the province's billion-dollar treaty process.

Treaty highlights include a land package of 724 hectares plus \$13.9 million over 10 years in addition to \$2 million for mineral rights, \$2.8 million in ongoing self-government costs, \$15.8 million in one-time start-up costs related to programs such as culture and parks, and a quota of the salmon fishery.

The B.C. treaty process has cost taxpayers about \$1 billion since the mid-1990s. Negotiations leading to the Nisga'a treaty in 2000 began earlier outside the current B.C. treaty process.

The Lheidli T'enneh First Nation in Prince George rejected a \$76-million treaty earlier this year, prompting the province to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in hopes of ensuring a yes vote in Tsawwassen, including on consultants and travel costs for natives to visit with the Nisga'a. Some of the toughest criticism of the Tsawwassen treaty has centred on the prospect of prime agricultural lands being transferred to the band to be converted into lucrative industrial port development.