

Vancouver Sun article on Tsawwassen

Band now has the tools to gain the benefits other Canadians enjoy

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Glenn Baglo, Sun files

Tsawwassen Chief Kim Baird saw her hard work on behalf of the proposed treaty pay off.

The collective sigh of relief from supporters of the British Columbia treaty negotiation process may have been loud enough to briefly drown out the noise of the fireworks Wednesday night following the news that the Tsawwassen band voted to ratify their proposed agreement.

Once approved by the provincial and federal governments, the Tsawwassen agreement will become both the first urban land claims settlement in B.C. and, more importantly, the first achieved under the comprehensive treaty claims procedures set up in the early 1990s.

The ratification of this treaty does not fully resuscitate the struggling process, which has until now failed to produce a single treaty despite the \$1 billion invested, but failure would have been fatal.

Tsawwassen Chief Kim Baird deserves full marks for first achieving the agreement that was ratified this week and then focusing her efforts to sell the pact to the audience that mattered most, the roughly 300 members of the band who would be voting.

The vote is a successful culmination of a long, difficult process for the band, but also just the beginning of what will be an equally tough job of leveraging the benefits of the treaty into a better life for members of the band.

One of the serious remaining challenges is the antipathy of the surrounding community. The opposition in Delta to the proposed treaty ran deeper than simply some understandable unhappiness over the prospect of losing farmland from the Agriculture Land Reserve.

The municipality and the band have been feuding for years, with the result that services most people in the Lower Mainland take for granted are not available on the Tsawwassen Reserve.

One little-noticed aspect of the agreement will be membership for the band in the Greater Vancouver Regional District, so it will be able to negotiate access to water and sewers itself without having to go through the often-hostile neighbouring municipality.

In exchange for the new rights, the Tsawwassen are losing their tax-exempt status.

None of this is a free ticket to a prosperous future. It's more like, as Baird said following the vote, a new set of tools. How useful they are will depend on how they are used.

Just as the vote was closely watched, so too will be the band's progress in bettering the lives of its members in the years ahead.

One fierce opponent of the treaty process wrote in a press release, "Two down, 202 to go." But two, which includes the Nisga'a treaty that was achieved outside the current negotiating framework, is still a whole lot better than none.

On Saturday, the Maa-Nulth, a group of five bands on Vancouver Island, start their ratification vote in what will be another closely watched contest. The best hope is that the success of the Tsawwassen in achieving a treaty will encourage the Maa-Nulth to also take a chance on a better

deal for the future and ultimately create enough momentum to bring other stalled treaty negotiations to life.

But if the Tsawwassen treaty achieves nothing else except giving band members a fair shot at obtaining the same quality of life enjoyed by other Canadians in the Lower Mainland, it will still be a success.

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