

Island's first modern-day treaty a 'vision of future' Deal lets Maa-nulth leave painful past behind, chiefs say

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Leaders of five First Nations spoke about fresh new opportunities for their people as Vancouver Island's first modern-day treaty was introduced yesterday in the B.C. legislature.

Chiefs from the Maa-nulth First Nations on the Island's west coast were invited to the bar of the chamber to address MLAs about the deal, which will see the 2,000 Maa-nulth receive more than \$100 million in cash and nearly 25,000 hectares of settlement land.

"The Maa-nulth treaty is an expression of our vision of the future," Uchucklesaht tribe chief councillor Charlie Cootes told the house. "It is a vision that permits us to see a future filled with opportunities. It is a vision that removes the crippling institutions of our colonial era. ... It is a vision that permits us to move forward and leave the pain of the past behind."

The Maa-nulth people ratified the deal by a nearly 80 per cent margin in a vote completed last month. It is the second pact completed under the B.C. Treaty Commission.

The Tsawwassen final agreement was passed earlier this month by MLAs and is just awaiting royal assent.

The Maa-nulth treaty is the first multi-First Nation agreement to be finalized. Besides the Uchucklesaht, it also covers members of the Ucluelet, Toquaht, Huu-ay-aht and Ka:'yu:'k't'h'/Che:k'tles7et'h' First Nations, many of whom live near Bamfield, Port Alberni, Ucluelet and in Kyuquot Sound.

The treaty, expected to be passed quickly by the legislature, includes \$73.1 million in cash, annual resource revenue payments averaging \$1.2 million for 25 years, program and special project funding, and 24,550 hectares of land.

The total agreement, which includes hunting and fishing allotments, has been estimated by some to be worth up to \$500 million, although Premier Gordon Campbell disputed that figure.

The deal also gives the Maa-nulth nations self-government provisions similar to those of municipalities, including the right to participate in regional district boards and make laws on their lands.



CREDIT: John McKay, Times Colonist

Left to right: Uchucklesaht chief councillor Charlie Cootes Sr., Huu-ay-aht hereditary chief Spencer Peters (face obscured), Huu-ay-aht chief councillor Robert Dennis, Toquaht hereditary chief Bert Mack, Ka:'yu:'k't'h'/Che:k'tles7et'h' chief councillor Therese Smith and Ucluelet chief councillor Vi Mundy -- invited to the bar of the chamber at the B.C. legislature yesterday -- speak with Premier Gordon Campbell on the day their treaty was introduced.

In exchange, the Maa-nulth people will surrender their non-taxable status after 12 years. Their land will fall under provincial, rather than federal, jurisdiction and members will be able to own their homes.

Huu-ay-aht chief councillor Robert Dennis said the Maa-nulth weighed their options and decided a treaty was preferable to court action -- the approach taken by the Tsilhqot'in people. Yesterday, after almost 20 years in front of the courts, the B.C. Supreme Court ruled on the Tsilhqot'in title claim to a large traditional territory in the Interior.

"We're very happy that we've chosen this path," Dennis said, adding the Maa-nulth determined that going to court would cost "millions and millions" and result in multiple appeals.

"But then we looked at the treaty, and we looked at the opportunities it brought," he said. "It brought us more revenue, it brought us more governance, it brought us more land, and it brought an allocation to resources. So, clearly, this is the path we've chosen."

Prior to the treaty's introduction, Campbell presented the Maa-nulth with a canoe and each of the First Nations leaders with a paddle. They in turn gave paddles to Campbell and Senator Gerry St. Germain.

"This is a triumph for generations of Maa-nulth leaders and people," Campbell told about 200 Maa-nulth crammed into the legislature rotunda. "It's a triumph for their ancestors."

While leaders talked about opportunities for the Maa-nulth, chief councillor Therese Smith of the Ka: 'yu: 'k't'h'/Che: k'tles7et'h' warned that the deal itself is not the ultimate solution.

"The final agreement cannot and will not guarantee our people a better life, a fair share of our resources nor a place in the hearts of all British Columbians," she said. "We cannot legislate love."

"It is through the intent and the spirit of these very long, tiring and costly negotiations that we shall get to a better place -- all of us -- as British Columbians."

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