

Maa-Nulth members endorse treaty

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Members of the Maa-Nulth First Nations overwhelmingly endorsed a multi-million dollar treaty this week, making it the second treaty negotiated under the B.C. Treaty Commission.

"As of today, I am no longer 6630029501," said Tom Happynook, a member of the Huu-ay-aht First Nation, citing his status number.

"As of today, I am proud to be a Huu-a-aht. I am proud to be a Maa-Nulth. I am proud to be a British Columbian and I'm proud to be a Canadian."

The treaty with the federal and provincial governments would see a capital transfer of \$73.1 million, annual resource royalty payments for use of Crown lands averaging \$1.2 million for 25 years and a land transfer of almost 25,000 hectares.

With lump-sum payments, \$9.5 million in annual program funding, \$11.1 million for special projects and the rising value of west coast land, the treaty is estimated to be worth up to \$500 million. The agreement also eliminates tax exemptions.

Four of the five Maa-Nulth First Nations -- Toquaht, Uchucklesaht, Ucluelet and Ka:'yu:'k't'h'/Che: k:tles7et'h', with a total of 873 eligible voters -- voted on the agreement last week. The Maa-Nulth First Nations are located on the west side of Vancouver Island, surrounding Barkley Sound and Kyuquot Sound.

The Huu-ay-aht First Nations resoundingly endorsed the agreement in July with 90 per cent of eligible voters in favour.

"I think in five to 10 years, a lot of our members are going to own their own businesses and a lot of our members are going to work for our government," said Charlie Coats, chief councillor of the Uchucklesaht Tribe, from the Henderson Lake/Port Alberni area.

"They're going to own their own homes and they're going to own their own property. It's going to be something that they'll be proud of and they'll be able to generate wealth for themselves, which they haven't been able to do under the oppressive regime of the Indian Act."

The agreement will see elected and accountable First Nations governments, said Chief Robert Dennis of the Huu-ay-aht. "From a government perspective we're going to be in a position to have more control over our lives," Dennis said.

Happynook said the agreement means the Maa-Nulth people will "finally be able to plug into the economy of this province and Canada."

"I think you're going to see our youth excelling in education. I think you're going to see our youth excelling in sports. Just the whole environment and atmosphere of our communities is going to shift from to one of being proud of who they are."

Maa-Nulth lead negotiator Gary Yabsley said the most difficult part in hammering out the agreement was getting communities to first accept the notion that change was necessary.

The symbolism of getting out from under the Indian Act marks a significant shift, said Michael Prince, professor of social policy at the University of Victoria.

"The fact that they will obtain constitutional status is quite significant, and these bands will become First Nations governments with some sovereign powers, where they will have something far more than a local municipality will have," Prince said.

Although the settlements have been years in the making, Prince said the two treaties that have been signed so far under the B.C. Treaty Commission in some ways represent the relatively easier deals to reach.

"We still haven't tackled a tough one that's urban-based -- a land claim that's smack dab in the middle of a major urban development."

The Tsawwassen First Nation was the first treaty signed. Provincial ratification of that treaty and the Maa-Nulth deal are expected this fall.

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