

Maa-Nulth Say Yes To Treaty

Date 2007/10/22 0:10:00 | Topic: News: Alberni-Clayoquot



Chief Coun. Vi Mundy, centre, of the Ucluelet First Nation, Gert Touchie, left, and Wilson Jack, UFN hereditary chief, react to news that the Maa-nulth treaty passed inside Port Alberni's Hupacasath House Sunday. Tom Happynook, back left, jumps for joy. (Keven Drews Photo)

By Keven Drews

Tom Happynook leaped from his chair, with both arms pumping upwards, while Vi Mundy cried out in joy before dropping her head face-down onto a fold-out banquet table. Inside the Hupacasath House Sunday afternoon, members of Five West Vancouver Island First Nations laughed, cried and waved flags moments after ratifying a treaty with the provincial and federal governments.

"Today, the Maa-nulth stand together, proudly and take their rightful place in the society, culture and economic fabric of the province of British Columbia and Canada," said Happynook, a member of the Huu-ay-aht First Nation.

The Maa-nulth treaty will give the five tribes a capital transfer of \$73.1-million, annual resource royalty payments averaging \$1.2-million for 25 years and a land transfer totaling approximately 245 square kilometres.

The bands include Ucluelet, Toquaht, Uchucklesaht, Kyuquot and Huu-ay-aht First Nations. In July, the Huu-ay-aht voted 90 per cent in favour of the treaty.

The remaining tribes cast ballots between Oct. 13 and Oct. 20 and counted their votes Sunday. The ratification process required a positive vote of 50 per cent plus one for each First Nation.

Earlier in the day, the Kyuquot phoned in their results. Of 272 ballots cast, 192 voted in favour.

Representatives from the three remaining tribes gathered in Port Alberni Sunday.

Inside the House of Hupacasath, tribal members sat on row upon row of fold-out chairs and

in front of a table where four electoral officials counted green ballots.

First up was the Toquaht First Nation. Of 73 votes cast, 62 voted yes, 10 voted no. One ballot was rejected.

Next to be tallied were the Uchucklesaht's votes. Of 120 votes, 116 voted yes, two voted no and two ballots were rejected.

But tensions grew and the room fell silent as electoral officials counted Ucluelet's votes.

After officials passed the 189th yes vote, the number required for the treaty to pass based on 376 eligible voters, a cheer erupted through the crowd.

The final tally was 233 in favour, 94 opposed and four rejected ballots. Of the 376 eligible to vote, 331 cast ballots.

"I would like to congratulate the members of the Maa-nulth First Nations, their leaders and lead negotiator Gary Yabsley, on the successful ratification of the Maa-nulth First Nations Final Agreement," said Chuck Strahl, minister of Indian affairs and northern development, in a press release issued later.

B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell also congratulated the bands.

"The ratification is a great achievement in the important work of treaty-making," he said.

"The Maa-nulth First Nations are demonstrating strength, confidence, and self-determination. We are committed to working together with First Nations to continue to build meaningful agreements, to affect real change in Aboriginal communities around B.C."

The treaty must now go to the provincial and federal governments for ratification.

Chief Coun. Charlie Cootes, of the Uchucklesaht First Nation, said he found it hard to keep a grin off his face.

"We're going to make the lives better for everyone in our community."

He said band members will now have to digest what happened.

"That will take a little time."

Chief Coun. Mundy, of the Ucluelet First Nation, said the words "we did it, we did it," raced across her mind the moment the treaty passed.

"There's a lot of work ahead," she said.

The band wants to build a five-star, First Nation-oriented resort once the treaty is finally passed.

"The first thing that crossed my mind was exactly what Vi said," added Bert Mack, a hereditary Toquaht chief. "We tried to get things going when my father was still alive.

"It's always been in my family that the treaty was the way to go to get rid of the Indian Act." Because the forestry and fishing industries are no longer as powerful as they once were, the Toquaht will focus on real estate, said Mack.

"We've got 70-74 kilometres of waterfront property."

Gary Yabsley, Maa-nulth chief negotiator, said the treaty could go to the provincial government by the beginning of November and before Parliament in one year.

If all goes well, he added, the treaty could become effective by early 2010.

The Maa-nulth will become the second modern-day treaty to come before the B.C. legislature this year.

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