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Cowichan Tribes flexing new muscles in the valley

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By Patrick Hrushowy
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The relationship between Cowichan Tribes and its surrounding non-native community is undergoing radical change that is largely escaping public attention.

These changes are not necessarily unfriendly but are certainly focussed on championing First Nations issues in a very determined way. The tone stresses peaceful coexistence but there is no doubt they mean business – a velvet glove, so to speak, covering a very firm fist.

Chief Lydia Hwitsum, who will likely announce she will seek re-election during Tribes elections in December, is part of new breed of First Nations leaders in B.C. – young, educated and gaining in political savvy.

Charming, personable, yet firm as a rock, Hwitsum has built on last year's wildly successful NAIG games and positioned Cowichan Tribes as an increasingly directed and firm voice in the broader community.

Chief Hwitsum made a historic presentation to the CVRD board last spring that stressed two things – Cowichan Tribes is distinct nation with its own government, and that the way land use decisions are made in the Valley is about to change.

The net result is that land developers should take note: Cowichan Tribes is in the process of building the capacity to do its own evaluation of development proposals in their traditional territory and they are going to charge proponents fees to cover that evaluation. Secondly, they want developers to start their application processes with the Tribes first, not local government.

In the past local governments referred development proposals to First Nations for comment, with a reasonably tight deadline. Hwitsum said, in effect: No more; apply to us first or risk losing your entire investment when we stop you later.

First Nations determination to have it their way is evidenced in two recent court challenges of local government decisions – Paldi and North Cowichan's project to drill wells in the Chemainus River watershed.

It can be argued that sufficient science was done to cover First Nations expressed concerns but the challenge is going ahead anyway.

All this is happening against a backdrop of increased First Nations firmness in treaty negotiations.

Grand Chief Edward John of the First Nations Summit recently told UBCM delegates in Vancouver that the non-Native population had it all wrong. Treaty negotiations are not about how to settle with First Nations but rather are about the terms and conditions that First Nations will require to allow the newcomers to stay.

This continues to be the expressed attitude of Robert Morales, chief negotiator for the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group, which includes Cowichan Tribes.

Meanwhile, Cowichan Tribes is aggressively pursuing economic and business opportunities.

Tribes leadership wants sewer and water services extended across band lands; It wants to form a utility company, perhaps in partnership with the private sector, to own and operate those facilities; and it is looking at supplying water for the golf course in the stalled project in North Cowichan – and getting ownership of the golf course in return.

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In a little more than six weeks Cowichan Tribes voters will decide if they want Chief Hwitsum to take them further in this new relationship of their own making. These are interesting times.

Got a tip or a comment? E-mail me at phrushowy@shaw.ca