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Premier Gordon Campbell cheers the opening of the North American Indigenous Games.
Cowichan Tribes general manager Ernie Elliott said negotiations with the province are going well, but stalls have been coming from the federal end.
Andrew Leong

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Cowichan hopes federal vote kickstarts treaty negotiations

By Krista Siefken - Cowichan News Leader and Pictorial

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With the federal election concluded and Parliament expected to get back to work in the coming weeks, Cowichan's First Nations community is hoping to see renewed efforts around treaty negotiations.

"Optimistic might be a bit too strong a word, but we're hopeful that this Conservative government is going to be more receptive than they were in their first term, in terms of moving forward on our issues," said Robert Morales, chief negotiator with the 15-year-old Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group.

"As a result of the election, in terms of the minority government, we feel it's good and hopefully we'll be able to have the Conservative government deal with some of the issues that were pressing on the treaty negotiation side of things," he added. "We hope that the opposition parties can work with us in terms of trying to move the agenda forward."

The treaty group anticipates hearing a government response to the "common table" issues, which include recognition/certainty, constitutional status of treaty lands, governance, fisheries, fiscal relations and structures of shared decision-making.

"We're hoping that will be one of the first orders of business once they get back to work, but it is a wait-and-see whether there is going to be any change, particularly around those six key issues we have to discuss," said Morales.

Calls to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada for comment were not returned by press time, but Ernie Elliot, general manager at Cowichan Tribes, said with a government make-up similar to the one before the Oct. 14 election, he doesn't anticipate a bolstered effort around treaty negotiations or other aboriginal issues from the minority Conservative government.

"I don't really expect much to change," Elliott told the News Leader Pictorial. "When Harper and his government got elected the first time they cancelled the Kelowna Accord and that didn't sit too well with us because there were a lot of promises made by the Liberal government, but when Harper got elected those went aside."

And Elliott said treaty negotiations have been going well with the B.C. government but stalls are coming from the federal end.

"The province has been really anxious, and we've been working with them quite closely," added Elliott.

But in terms of local issues, Cowichan Tribes is happy to work with NDP MP Jean Crowder for another term.

"I think Cowichan Tribes is satisfied with the efforts of Jean Crowder," explained Elliott. "Jean's really supportive of any of our endeavours and we're counting on her to continue that."

Morales agreed.

"I think first of all we congratulate and are pleased Jean Crowder was re-elected in our riding," said the chief negotiator. "She is the NDP's critic of Indian Affairs and we found her an available resource to work with, so we're pleased with that."

Treaties by the numbers

During the past 15 years, treaty negotiations in B.C. have carried a cost of more than \$1.1 billion at the federal, provincial and First Nation levels, according to a report by the Fraser Institute. That report also indicates that during the 15 years, just eight treaties have been passed or entered the initial or final negotiation stages.


Robert Morales, chief negotiator at the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group, said he estimates the cost to the six First Nations bands that make up the treaty group to be "multiple millions of dollars."

"There are several millions of dollars just on our side of the table," said Morales. "Then you have the federal government and provincial government side of the table, and how they calculate their funding I'm not sure."

It is unknown how much the federal and provincial governments have spent on negotiations with the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group. Calls to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada were not returned by press time and officials with the B.C. Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation stated they did not "separately identify or accumulate the cost of negotiating treaties at individual tables."

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