

Progress in Treaty Talks Depends on Education, Support, Leaders Say

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First Nations leaders and treaty negotiators say public education and support is key to firing up stalled treaty negotiations and settling more treaties across the province.

A public forum in Duncan yesterday brought together politicians, aboriginal representatives and the public to share views on the murky topic of treaty negotiations.

The event, held at the Duncan Christian Reformed Church, was organized by the Aboriginal Neighbours, a group that includes the Anglican Diocese of B.C. and the United Church.

The turnout of more than 100 people was encouraging and showed First Nations people have support, said Dan Smith of the Kwakwaka'wakw band of Campbell River.

"What we need are the messengers, the power of the one individual who will go out and talk to their friends and relatives and say, 'Let's do something right. Let's make it right, talk with the First Nations and see what their issues are.'"

The first treaty in Canada was signed in 1647 on the basis of friendship between East Coast aboriginals and European immigrants, said Smith in an address to an audience of mixed races. "We opened our arms and embraced the newcomers and look what we got in return -- you know the history."

Aboriginal people were relegated to reserves, faced abuse under the residential school system and lost much of their language and culture.

Smith said his own people originally roamed a territory spanning 28,000 square kilometres, which he described as bigger than Prince Edward Island. "And yet the Campbell River Indian band right now has maybe 300 acres reserved for them ... half the size of Stanley Park."

Robert Morales, a Cowichan Tribes' treaty negotiator, said the event was about reaching out to non-First Nation people and trying to educate them about the issues and why the process is taking so long.

The Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group, of which Cowichan Tribes is a member, has firmed up two-thirds of the treaty package but big issues remain unresolved.

"We need to get the right people in the room because the negotiators at the table currently do not have the mandate or the authority to go beyond their marching orders," said Morales, a lawyer with 14 years' experience in private practice.

Public support is critical, said Morales, who called for more such public forums.

"I think that governments operate on the prospect of re-election, they operate on being able to maintain a public image and I think that public opinion is pretty important if we expect the government to move off of these outdated colonial policies that are driving their mandates."