

## **TREATY NEGOTIATIONS ON HORIZON**

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Stymied treaty negotiations could soon move forward, now that federal and provincial governments have agreed to sit down at a common table of B.C.'s First Nations.

In October 2006, 46 First Nations from across the province signed the Unity Protocol, creating a common voice to ask negotiators to deal with six key barriers to treaty signing: certainty, constitutional status of treaty lands, governance, co-management of lands and resources, fiscal relations and taxation, and fisheries.

On Friday, following a week of meetings, the governments agreed, with the B.C. Treaty Commission putting up \$400,000 toward the process.

"It's being almost two years since this idea first came up and I certainly hope we can overcome the barriers we've found," said Robert Morales, who's been chosen by First Nations to lead the negotiations at the table.

"The issue has been the government negotiators have been coming to the table with a predetermined outcome in mind and have been unable to waiver from their mandate. It hasn't been true negotiations."

Currently 58 First Nations are involved in the treaty process, with 48 sets of negotiations taking place. Seven have signed agreements-in-principle while the majority are in Stage 4 of the six-stage process.

In the past First Nations have argued the negotiators don't have enough wiggle room to make concessions, leading to stalled talks and, ultimately, the signing of the Unity Protocol and creation of the common table.

"This could be the key piece to getting treaties done," Morales said. "If not, it's possibly the last kick at the can.

"If we can't overcome the obstacles in front of us then we will have two choices; either give in to the governments' positions or walk away from the treaty process and move to the courts."

In the past, B.C.'s First Nations have made it clear they are willing to assert their rights recognized by the Supreme Court of Canada.

"We must be very, very assertive," Westbank First Nation Chief Robert Louie said at the signing of the Unity Protocol.

"Every business must know there are unsettled treaties. Notice is given to the prime minister and the premier, industry and the public that we wish to settle for fair terms.

"We will not give up the jurisdiction of our land."