

## **Debt \$3 Million and Counting for Treaty**

By Aaron Bichard

Duncan News Leader and Pictorial. 20 December 2006

The foot dragging approach to solving B.C. treaty issues has cost taxpayers nearly \$700 million, and will cost First Nations hefty sums upon settlement.

The Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group, representing the Chemainus, Cowichan Tribes, Halalt, Lake Cowichan, Lyackson and Penelakut, has been steadily sinking into debt trying to reach an agreement.

"We've crossed the \$3 million mark right now," chief negotiator Robert Morales said. "It's been a long process and right now we're stalemated."

A recent release of findings by provincial and federal auditors of the treaty process found B.C. has spent more than \$260 million while the federal government has shelled out another \$426 million.

First Nations province-wide have borrowed more than \$300 million in the 13 years of negotiations governed by the B.C. Treaty Commission process.

Auditor General Sheila Fraser pointed in her report to reels of red tape policy and processes slowing down negotiations and cranking up costs.

Fraser recommends a faster and co-ordinated process for policymaking, pointing to the 40 various federal government agencies and departments involved in negotiations.

The report also recommends more accurate reporting out to government of treaty progress.

Morales believes the problem lies with an inability of the negotiators to stray from their strict mandates.

"The negotiators have an inflexibility to deviate from their mandate which has us stalemated," Morales said. "That's why 40 First Nations, representing 22,000 members, have joined together to present a united appeal to get this moving forward."

October in Nanaimo saw 14 treaty tables signed a protocol agreement asking governments to change their process.

"There needs to be a way for the negotiators to step beyond their mandate," Morales said. "Right now they're putting their offers forward and saying that's it, no negotiating."

Morales said the longer the treaty process drags on, the more effect it will have on First Nations pocketbooks.

“It’s always a concern when we are incurring debt while the others are not and can dip into the public purse as much as they need to,” he said.

B.C.’s first urban treaty with the 350-member Tsawwassen First Nation and the province’s first multi-party treaty with the Maa-nulth First Nations (a five-band group representing about 2,000 people living in Bamfield, Ucluelet, Alberni Inlet and Kyuquot Sound) were initialed earlier this month.

Both groups share territory claims with the traditional lands of the Hul’qumi’num.

The HTG is not nearing the stage the Tsawwassen and Maa-nulth have reached.

The Maa-nulth agreement involved 24,550 hectares of land being switched to fee-simple First Nation ownership, as well as making the First Nations one of the largest landowners in the Pacific Rim region.

In the Hul’qumi’num traditional territory, without Crown land to use as a bartering tool, the governments and the First Nations have met an impasse, Morales said.

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