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Out of the shadow



Tony Jacobs (right), speaker for the Legislative Assembly, and Chief Kim Baird (right) say the future is both exciting and daunting. Since the treaty was signed one year ago the band has focused on economic development and upgrading infrastructure.

Tyler Garnham photo

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Published: March 25, 2010 4:00 PM

Andrew Bucholtz - Reporter

At first glance, the boardroom in the Tsawwassen First Nation's administration building appears little different than similar facilities in other municipal environments. The leather chairs and solid wooden table would be at home in any government or corporate meeting room.

The traditional artwork on the wall stands out, though, particularly a complex painting featuring eagles swooping above a marine landscape. As the Tsawwassen people approach the first anniversary of the treaty signed last April 3 that allowed them to regain autonomy and self-governance, Chief Kim Baird

says the painting symbolizes what they've accomplished and the hope their treaty provides to other First Nations groups.

"That painting is from the Te'mexw Treaty Association," she says. "They're Coast Salish First Nation groups, I think there's five or six First Nations in that group from Vancouver Island, and they're hoping to reach a treaty eventually as well."

Baird says the painting reflects where the Tsawwassen people have come from, where they are and where they're going.

"My favourite part of it is the canoe coming out of the fog," she says. "It represents us coming out from the Indian Act. It's a representation of leadership and managing the lands and resources, culture and tradition and also the complexities of being in modern times. It's a lot that's conveyed. It was truly inspirational and fitting when we received it."

Baird said one of the most important aspects of the treaty is how it brought the Tsawwassen people out from the jurisdiction of the Indian Act and the Ministry of Indian and Northern Affairs.

The Indian Act was enacted by Parliament in 1876 and governs First Nations people, bands and reserves in Canada. It defines who is recognized as an "Indian" and how bands and reserves can operate.

"All the things we're doing don't require ministerial approval any more. We're on our own," Baird said. "It's a great feeling to be free of that layer of bureaucracy over local decision-making."

Tony Jacobs, the speaker of the TFN legislative assembly, said that aspect of the treaty fulfilled the long-held desire of the Tsawwassen people to regain control over their future.

"Going back to my forefathers, my grandfather and the generation before that, my people have always talked about the need to be self-sufficient and how we have to get out from under the thumb of the Indian Act," he said. "We can't be controlled by this document. The Indian Act didn't allow for a nation to create its own destiny. Now that's where we're at."

Jacobs said escaping the Indian Act is more than symbolic, though, as it also allows the community to make local decisions on economic development without running everything through Ottawa.

"Through the Indian Act, everything has to go through Indian Affairs," he said. "That process takes months, sometimes years, and you can't operate that way."

He said that process made it difficult for TFN leadership to accomplish anything in a timely fashion. Now, with expanded local powers, they operate more like a normal municipal government.

"The biggest impact is that the timeframe that's needed to go through Indian Affairs isn't needed anymore," he said. "We can do business normally like everyone else does business."

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The treaty hasn't been an instantaneous solution, though, and many of its effects haven't been fully felt yet.

Jacobs said TFN has spent most of the past year organizing their government, preparing a budget, planning infrastructure projects and creating an economic development agency.

"The past year, there's been a lot of focus on the economic development, the laws and the legislation to start planning the projects that will define our future and give us financial stability," he said. "Now we can start planning our community and building our community, because now we have something there to work with."

One of the first tangible developments will be upgrading the infrastructure on TFN land.

"Construction's going to start this month on new roads and new water services," Jacobs said.

He expects those upgrades and the new economic development agency will cause plenty of new community-based businesses to spring up in the near future, particularly in the tourism and retail sectors.

"Now actual development's going to take place, which changes the opportunities for our community," he said. "There's going to be a lot more jobs."

Jacobs said for Tsawwassen First Nation members hoping to start their own companies, this extra support will be crucial.

"Creating our own businesses, we can create our own future," he said. "We can be self-sufficient."

Jacobs said another key element of their future will be the band's ongoing partnership with Deltaport.

"Chief and council have been working very closely with the port," he said. "There's some long-term employment prospects there."

The treaty also gives TFN a presence on the Metro Vancouver board, which Jacobs said is a significant change.

"We're at the table with Metro, just as all the other municipalities are," he said. "There's a huge wrong that's been righted there."

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Many changes have happened since the treaty was signed, but there are still more in store.

Baird said the band has made substantial progress in the last year, but there still is a lot of planning, refining and building that needs to happen.

"It's a lot more work than we ever anticipated," she said. "We know we haven't got everything perfect. We have to assess things and improve them as we move forward."

Baird said she's been particularly impressed by what's been accomplished on the self-governance front.

"We've gone well beyond the bare requirements of the treaty," she said. "We're on the cutting edge of a lot of things."

Baird said the future holds both opportunities and challenges for TFN, but she's looking forward to facing it.

"It's both exciting and daunting," she said. "Although it's a lot of work, it's rebuilding our community, which is so very satisfying."