

FORESTRY COMMUNITY: PORT MCNEILL

By Robin Brunet

Photo courtesy of Graham Mackay



People acquainted with Port McNeill's long line of feisty civic leaders may be familiar with the following comment: "Small community voices need a seat at the table, because we feel the effects of legislative changes much more quickly than larger municipalities."

But even Port McNeill residents—and there are about 2,150 of them—may be forgiven for assuming the remark was made by their late, longtime Mayor Gerry Furney. In fact, it was voiced this year by current Mayor Gaby Wickstrom, who is as equally determined as her predecessor

was to prevent outsiders from charting the economic fate of her small but proud town.

In July, *Truck LoggerBC* magazine found Wickstrom in typical fighting form. Once more, green groups were urging politicians to end old-growth



logging, and Victoria councillors were proposing climate change initiatives that critics argued would negatively impact forestry and the stumpage revenues (\$60 million last year alone) earned by the Regional District of Mount Waddington, of which Port McNeill is a part.

Wickstrom said, “We enjoyed a good year in 2018 between collecting stumpage and generating revenue from our Community Forest, and yet when I attended an Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities meeting in May, it was suggested that we need to

transition our logging industry. I asked, “What do you propose we transition to?” And nobody could give me an answer.”

Wickstrom is well aware that Furney spent most of the 1990s defending his community against urban activists and politicians who sought to unduly restrict

resource industries, even though they are the lifeblood of many rural communities. She observes, “So now we have the younger generation harbouring the false notion that we devastate the forests, only this time they’re linking our activities to climate change.

“Nothing is new, really. Twenty-four years ago, when I moved to Port McNeill, I conducted forestry tours and discussed our stringent codes and sustainable practices, and visitors from Europe said to me, ‘Back home we’re told that it’s nothing but rape and pillage here—yet we had to drive all day through forests to get to you!’”

Wickstrom’s solution to the latest wave of onerous green activism is to plant herself in the midst of the action. “I’m a huge advocate of small community voices having a seat at the table, which is why I’m running for a seat on the Union of BC Municipalities as a small communities representative,” she says. “It’s also important to be on the region wide Climate Action Plan panel involving Vancouver Island communities. I was recently asked by one panel member, ‘What is your climate challenge in Port McNeill?’ And I replied, ‘Honestly, it’s larger cities. You have no idea the impact your policies will have on small communities.’”

It is estimated that 55 per cent of logging in the Port McNeill area is old growth, which keeps residents gainfully employed by companies such as Western Forest Products (Woss), TimberWest, Interfor, and many others.

The thriving North Island Community Forest has a total area of 2,390 hectares, “And it’s brought about \$1.78 million into our community so far,” says Wickstrom, adding that the money has been put into a reserve to fund future infrastructure needs. “Moving ahead, our goal is to expand the Community Forest in conjunction with First Nations.”

The community Wickstrom and her council are so determined to protect is a classic outcome of determined individuals battling the odds to literally develop something out of nothing. In the 1950s, workers were brought to Port McNeill by steamship twice a week from Vancouver, and most stayed only long enough to build up a stake before

departing. But people who loved the international flavour of the community such as Furney, who arrived in Port McNeill in 1956 and worked as a truck logger, saw promise in this part of the North Island—and remained.

A six-member Chamber of Commerce was formed in 1961 to obtain government funding for civic development, and because there was no regard for protocol, chamber members were constantly concocting money-raising contests, media events, and shaming politicians into giving them money.

Port McNeill families take pride in the fact they outgrew their logging-camp origins through sheer moxie, and the oldest residents remember the schemes Furney concocted to develop the community, including the time the combative Irishman sent Ottawa 100-foot-long telegrams wrapped around shillelaghs demanding money for a breakwater. Or when he flew Victoria reporters up to play ‘pothole golf’ on his unpaved roads, winning national headlines and, eventually, blacktop with highway links.

In 1966, Port McNeill was incorporated as a village, and throughout the 1970s the Pioneer Timber bunkhouses were phased out and permanent homes built. In 1982, Port McNeill became the first town in Canada incorporated under the new Canadian Constitution.

Port McNeill residents have always retained the distinct sense that they have had to fight for every facility and service taken for granted in urban centres. Indeed, in the 1980s the town operated on a \$400,000 annual budget, which meant that school running tracks and other amenities had to be built by volunteers. Local fundraising events have been another important tool: in the 1990s they enabled the Chamber to build a six-unit seniors’ home, after the town had been turned down for government subsidies.

Given this history, it’s not surprising that Wickstrom looks forward to dispelling misinformation about the logging industry and showcasing just how resourceful, if vulnerable, towns such as hers are. “As various climate action meetings are scheduled, Port McNeill councillors and myself are constantly networking to disseminate our message

and create a united front against policies that would harm our livelihood,” she says.

Wickstrom also champions any initiative that aims to inject new blood into the aging forestry workforce. “We entered into a collaboration with the BC Forest Safety Council and Vancouver Island University whereby VIU students come here to a harvesting environment and provide them with the foundation skills and knowledge required to work safely, productively, and sustainably,” she says. “This VIU accredited course tries to place students in the region upon graduation.”

Also, as a forward-thinking civic leader Wickstrom is keen to pursue economic diversification. “Elements in our favour include affordable housing, a genuine rural lifestyle, and the fact that today many people can work anywhere provided the fibre-optic infrastructure meets all requirements—and ours does,” she says. “These factors have contributed to a recent influx of new residents, and we’re diversifying slowly but surely: mining exploration is happening in the region, and a new hotel and a brew pub is being built.”

Wickstrom envisions a time in the foreseeable future where a strong logging base in Port McNeill is augmented by small tech companies and perhaps even a thriving craft retail industry (she and her councillors are also determining ways to expand tourism, which would support retail initiatives).

Capping all of this is a plan to revitalize downtown Port McNeill.

Wickstrom concludes, “Logging is our predominant industry for which we’re grateful and will continue to support. We’ve proven that anything can be done when there’s passion and we work together—and that’s why I’m excited by the future.”▲