



## FOREST COMMUNITY: UCLUELET

By Robin Brunet

Many rural mayors rightfully pride themselves on being heavily involved in the community. But long-time logger, entrepreneur, and Ucluelet Mayor Mayco Noel brought new meaning to the term during the height of the coronavirus lockdowns in April, when he talked to *Truck LoggerBC* while driving a garbage truck.

Like so many civic leaders of relatively small towns, Noel was determined that life in Ucluelet would continue as normally as possible in the wake of government closing the economy—and driving a garbage truck was just one of several services he provided via his company, Ucluelet Rent-It-Center Ltd.

His dedication is understandable, considering the gains Ucluelet has achieved. He speaks with unabashed pride about the Barkley Community Forest Corporation, a partnership between the District of Ucluelet and the Toquaht Nation: about 27,000 cubic metres is harvested annually within its 6,760 hectares, and Noel refers to it as “One way we’ve been able to maintain our forestry roots, even though we’ve diversified our economy by focusing on tourism.”

As garbage cans clang in the background, he adds, “Small communities are especially vulnerable to economic

downturns, and I honestly believe that community forests if maintained properly are a fantastic asset to our annual budgets. In good times they allow us to thrive and grow, and during emergencies like the lockdowns the money generated helps keep us operational.”

There’s no mistaking Noel’s logging background: he doesn’t waste words (including the four-letter ones) and is blunt, and by necessity he views every challenge as an opportunity. And just as you can’t separate the logger from his persona, you also can’t separate him emotionally from Ucluelet, the town of 1,800 residents in which he was born and raised. “I’ve lived elsewhere in my 50 years, but this is the only place that feels like home,” he says.

Located on the western edge of Barkley Sound on the outer west coast of Vancouver Island, Ucluelet enjoyed a colourful history as a fishing mecca, a home for a whaling station, and even a base for seaplanes (during World War Two) before becoming incorporated in 1952 and later a district in 1977.

When mechanized logging replaced traditional methods in the 1950s Ucluelet also became a logging hub, but regional activity over the decades was said to have destroyed or degraded

significant amounts of salmonid habitat crucial to the town’s economy. This prompted loggers, First Nations, biologists, and forestry professionals to form the Central Westcoast Forest Society in 1995, which today aids and supports the conservation of wild fish populations through habitat restoration, research, and monitoring.

Like its neighbour Tofino, Ucluelet eventually made the transition from a resource-dependent economy to one of year-round tourism, and today its Pacific Rim Visitor Centre is the second most visited tourism facility after Victoria. In addition to fishing, attractions include surfing, whale watching, kayaking, camping, and biking.

As a youth, Noel studied criminal law and worked for the ambulance service before being asked by a logging crew that was staying in his family’s hotel if he wanted to assist in their heli-logging operations. “I was 21, I said yes, and I almost blew my chance at a career by waking up late for work the next morning,” he recalls.

What followed was twenty-five years of Noel employed by the Coulson Group of Companies: first on the ground under hovering Sikorsky S-61s, and subsequently as a logging manager responsible



for teams of up to 100 unionized and contractor staff. Under his supervision over two million cubic metres of timber was harvested over a 16-year period, and when Coulson diversified to include fire-fighting in its range of activities in the early 2000s, Noel became project manager of aviation.

Understandably, while Noel is proud of Ucluelet's skill in developing a viable tourism industry, he becomes especially animated when discussing the Barkley Community Forest Corporation, which was formed five years ago. "For starters, it's been an incredible experience partnering with the Toquaht Nation, a very small group that was seeking business opportunities," he says. "They could have easily undertaken the forestry themselves, but they were gung-ho about partnering for the betterment of the overall community."

He adds that five years ago the corporation "had a negative bank balance, but in the last three years we've split \$3 million apiece in profits. That may not sound like much until you consider that Ucluelet's average annual budget is in the range of \$6-\$7 million."

The corporation's profitability first made headlines in December of 2018, when Noel and his council accepted

a cheque for \$1 million from Barkley Board Chair Terry Smith. "We had one contract of 20,000 cubic metres that netted us almost \$4 million: that's pretty spectacular," said Noel, adding that nobody expected the market for cedar to be so good.

District Chief Administrative Officer Mark Boysen noted that when the first dividend was paid earlier that year, council launched a survey asking residents what they thought would be the best use of the community forest's funds—and affordable housing proved to be the number one priority.

Noah Plonka, manager of business operations at the Toquaht Nation, points out that the development of the community forest was years in the making. "Our late Chief, Bert Mack, spent ten years working to get it started by laying the ground work with a succession of mayors. We've always enjoyed a good working relationship with the Ucluelet community and its civic leaders, so it made sense to partner on this initiative."

Plonka adds that, "As a group very much involved in logging but small in size, us working together in a partnership makes things go very smoothly. As for Mayco, I've known him for years—he's a great guy. I dealt with Coulson at

their mills and was a salvager when he was working for that company."

Today, while affordable housing is still needed, the main goal of residents is the same as everyone's around the world: to get back to normal, or at least back to a degree of economic prosperity. And on that score, even when easement of the global lockdowns seemed a long way off in April, Noel could see ahead to Ucluelet's recovery. "It will be a challenge for the charter fishing business and others to maintain social distancing, for example, but where there's a will there's a way," he said.

"Business models will change, in many cases I'm sure for the better. And I think we'll see an influx of urbanites to many rural areas, including ours, after the pandemic is over—and this means new investment opportunities. Whatever happens, initiatives such as our community forest will continue to thrive, and we'll work together to ensure that Ucluelet remains a desirable place to live with a rich heritage to draw from."▲