



FORESTRY COMMUNITY: POWELL RIVER

By Robin Brunet

In a community whose paper mill has been an icon for generations and where logging thrives due to its flagship tenure TFL 39 and community forests, Powell River has had an eventful 2020—and not just because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Early in the year, the proud city of 13,500 residents was still contending with an eight-month strike affecting more than 2,000 workers in the manufacturing and logging sectors as a result of negotiations breaking down between United Steelworkers union Local 1-1937 and Western Forest Products (WFP).

Then, Paper Excellence Group announced that the mill would be “curtailed” until mid-summer. Vice President of Environment, Health & Safety and Communications Graham Kissack explained, “An exceptional intersection of events has negatively impacted our operations, including: a material shortage of economic forest fibre on BC’s coast; [and] a significant external malware attack which rendered our paper business enterprise systems inoperable.”

COVID-19 was also cited as a reason for the curtailment, having “materially impacted the supply chain for many of the paper products that we manufacture,” according to Kissack, whose mill produces newsprint and uncoated mechanical specialty papers and employs 360 people.

By August, when *Truck LoggerBC* met Powell River Mayor Dave Formosa, foresters had returned to work thanks to the signing of a five-year agreement—but the mill remained closed with no timeline for re-opening. “It requires new products and a change in the market landscape,” he said, adding that running and selling thermo-mechanical pulp might be a potential option.

And yet, despite the strife, Formosa was in a good mood. “We’ve worked hard to create a harmonious community and our efforts continue to pay off,” he says. “A lot of elements are working in our favour as the economy re-opens, and the demographic of our city is changing in an exciting way.”

After a pause, Formosa enthusiastically blurts a statement that perhaps only long-time locals would fully appreciate. “The changes are such that even children have returned to Powell River! There’s a great sense of life to our community now.”

Clint Williams, Hegus of Tla’amin Nation, is even more upbeat: “Sure, everybody has had their challenges in 2020, but our business opportunities are endless and the world is truly our oyster, after many years of not being in a good state.”

That is not to say the Powell River of old wasn’t lively or attractive. The region’s potential was first identified

in 1908, when two Minnesota lumbermen realized the power generation to be had from the 188-foot waterfall cascading off Powell Lake. The following year they constructed the Powell River Paper Company mill—the first pulp and paper mill on the west coast of Canada—and in 1912 the first roll of saleable newsprint was produced (eventually, one in every 25 newspapers in the world would be printed on paper from the mill).

Concurrently, Julius Bloedel, John Stewart, and Patrick Welch leased logging rights on 10,000 acres of prime timber at Myrtle Point for \$100,000, and by the time they moved operations to Vancouver Island in 1928, Powell River’s status as an industry town was well established.

Today, Powell River’s loggers cut timber on TFL 39 Block 1 held by WFP, which covers 360,000 hectares of land on northern Vancouver Island, North Broughton Island, and the mainland coast in the vicinity of Powell River and Phillips Arm. And although economic diversification has led to an increasing focus on ecotourism and the arts, Formosa (whose family emigrated to the city in the 1950s) says his home is still widely valued as a logging community. “That goes for the former city dwellers and young families who are moving here to take advantage of our lifestyle opportunities and lower cost of living,” he says.



But why would millennials with no ties to the industry be so respectful of it? Without hesitation, Formosa replies, “Because of our community forest, for starters.”

The mayor is referring to the Powell River Community Forest Agreement (CFA) that was awarded in August of 2006 and covers 7,100 hectares with a sustainable allowable annual cut of 35,000 cubic metres. “Our CFA pumps hundreds of thousands of dollars into our community yearly and has paid for the roof of our curling rink, the equipment used in the rink, and many other things,” he says.

Indeed, in June of this year city council withdrew \$957,000 from the CFA’s reserve fund for 18 projects (with President Greg Hemphill appearing in the council chambers sans recipients due to social distancing concerns). Some of the money will be COVID-19 related and allocated to Powell River Public Library, Evergreen Care Unit, and outdoor projects with seasonal restraints. Money will also support the thermal energy conversion for the Powell River Recreation Complex.

Minus this spending, a healthy \$2.3 million remains in the fund for this fall and the spring update in 2021. “Logging as an industry in BC may be facing enormous challenges, but it’s still a huge part of our livelihood,” says Formosa.

Powell River’s other community forest, the Sliammon, is operated by the Tla’amin Nation, whose status as a treaty nation means it also has tenure in the region. “To say this has transformed us for the better would be an understatement,” says Hegus Clint Williams. “Our CFA cut is 28,000 cubic metres annually and we were recently awarded our third harvesting block on the 8,300 hectares of fee-simple lands we obtained through our treaty settlement four years ago. We also have a small woodlot that yields about 3,500 cubic metres yearly.”

By contrast, Williams says that when his nation was still the Sliammon Indian Band, “We were in a horrible cash/debt situation and everything was piling up. Frankly, it was a miserable situation, but obtaining tenure turned everything around for us. We went from being in the red to into the black very quickly.”

Treaty status has also given Tla’amin Nation the potential to expand upon its propensity for partnering with other community members, thus building on the success that began 14 years ago when it began a 50/50 partnership with Goat Lake Forest Products, which provides shakes and shingles to homeowners, construction contractors, importers, and distributors around the world. “Sliammon Lake Contracting is the contracting arm,”

says Williams. “We do the logging and split the profits with our partners.”

Currently, Tla’amin Nation is updating its community plan to identify goals and business opportunities; meanwhile, Formosa is busy strategizing on how to increase the influx of new families and build Powell River’s tax base. The common bond between the two men is optimism about the future, something evident when they are asked what lies ahead for them.

Williams says, “The future is really bright, and collaboration will be the key moving forward. There’s a very strong team spirit that defines Powell River, and we’re glad to be a part of it.”

Formosa concludes, “Newcomers should know that they can get a job in many fields up here, skilled or unskilled, and we’re an excellent place to start a new business.

“My own career began when I was 18 and got a job at the mill, then I became an independent trucker. Back then I thought the sky was the limit for me, and it’s heartening to see the younger generation come to Powell River and feel the same way.” 🌲