



FORESTRY COMMUNITY: WILLIAMS LAKE

By Robin Brunet

The forestry sector always needs fighters from the political realm on their side, and Walt Cobb is exactly that. Just ask anyone who recalls him on television in the 1990s berating former BC Premier Mike Harcourt for signing off on the Commission on Resources and Environment without full knowledge of its tenets.

Cobb did so during his 1990-96 tenure as mayor of Williams Lake, and today, in his sixth year of another term as mayor, he is more adamant than ever about protecting forestry jobs and creating opportunities in his neck of the woods—despite the changing demographic of residents who may not fully appreciate the economic importance of the resource.

His determination is informed by a deep love for his city of 11,000 people (and 25,000 in the surrounding area). “My family moved here in 1954 when I was 10 and I always thought this was a great place in which to grow up and raise a family,” he says. “That sentiment is shared today by outdoor recreationists and others who have moved here and helped diversify the economy. But the fact remains our prosperity has always been and always will be driven by the resource sector.”

Indeed, although Williams Lake today is “the destination spot for the true adventure seeker” (according to Tourism

Williams Lake’s website), forestry related businesses are intertwined within the community. Tolko Industries has two dimensional mills, two stud mills and a planer; West Fraser operates a planer and a plywood plant; and smaller operators such as long-time Williams Lake resident Sigurdson Forest Products employs 120 people directly on payroll. Additionally, a pellet plant is operated by Pinnacle Renewable Energy Inc., and a 66-megawatt biomass-fuelled co-gen plant is operated by Atlantic Power Corporation.

Beth Veenkamp, economic development officer for Williams Lake, notes that, “Close to 30 percent of our taxes come from our sawmills alone. Industries such as tourism are incredibly valuable, but there’s no substituting the resource sector to keep our community thriving.”

Williams Lake has also been recognized for First Nations involvement in the industry. Case in point: Tsi Del Del Enterprises Ltd., a joint venture between the Tsideldel First Nation (formerly the Alexis Creek First Nation) and Tolko Industries, is a fully integrated forestry company involved in forestry consulting, harvesting, log sales, silviculture, and most recently, biomass harvesting in the bush—all within forest licences belonging to the Tsideldel and other First Nations west of the city. The company employs about 100 staff and subcontractors, and

harvests between 340,000 and 400,000 cubic metres annually.

On paper, Williams Lake’s access to timber seems impressive. Its timber supply area (TSA) lies in the central Cariboo Region, straddling the Fraser Basin and the Interior Plateau between the Coast Mountains on the west and Cariboo Mountains on the east. The TSA is bounded by the Quesnel TSA to the north and the 100 Mile House and Lillooet TSAs to the south.

At about 4.93 million hectares with an allowable annual cut (AAC) of three million cubic metres, this is one of the largest TSAs in the province and includes Williams Lake plus the communities of Horsefly, Alexis Creek, Anahim Lake and Tatla Lake.

But the numbers are deceptive. Cobb points out that many areas in his TSA have been rendered out of bounds due to mule deer winter range considerations, riparian zones and tourism interests. “Wildfires have also reduced a number of harvestable hectares, plus there will likely be a reduction in AAC in the next review,” he says.

As such, Cobb is in the curious position of being inclined to welcome new blood and tourists into his community on one hand and resisting the push to share forests that are technically earmarked for logging on the other. “Back in the 1990s



during the so-called ‘War in the Woods’ I was involved in the provincial land use planning process that examined and designated areas for agriculture, parks, and other uses—and I naively assumed that whatever was left over would be used for harvesting,” he recalls. “That was a big mistake. Now, in Williams Lake, we have areas of harvest being identified for back-country tourism, mountain biking—you name it.

“It’s an all-too-familiar problem: the Council of Forest Industries has calculated that only 22 million hectares of forestry in a 55 million hectare land base is available for logging, and only 1 percent of that figure is being cut annually. What we want in our community is for government to assign us a designated harvesting area that can’t be compromised by other interests.”

Unsurprisingly, Cobb and Veenkamp are proud of their community forest, which was announced by the Province in March of 2014. It is administered by the City in partnership with Williams Lake First Nation and encompasses two areas (the Flatrock south block and the Potato Mountain north block) capable of supporting an annual harvest of 40,000 cubic metres.

Veenkamp says, “We enjoy a great partnership with the Williams Lake First Nation, and together we’ve been

able to turn a profit over the past few years; the monies of which have been used for capital projects.”

However, even in this realm the BC government is expecting Williams Lake-based loggers to compromise. “Victoria doesn’t want us putting logging roads across trails that are being used by mountain bikers,” says Cobb. “And they don’t want their views to be ruined. The former concern is valid in terms of maintaining safety, but again the point is we need well defined, designated logging areas.”

Cobb concedes there is no magic formula for making this happen other than persistent lobbying. “But I’m optimistic about a good outcome, given that we have plenty of wood to go around,” he says. “We also enjoy good relationships with our tourism bureau and the back-country operators. So as long as we keep stating our case and emphasize that we utilize everything coming out of the bush down to the very last chip, there’s a good chance for industry growth. We might even see licences for biomass production in coming years.”

Veenkamp agrees that opportunities still exist. “We’re not out of wood in BC, we’re out of affordable wood, meaning we have to go further out,” she says. “Therefore, our job as a community is to make the right kind of investments in roads plus machinery for slope logging

and other conditions.” She adds that in order for that to happen, something has to give in Victoria: “Permits for cutting licences used to take several months, but now they can take up to three years—and the situation is no better in other resource industries.”

As for the closures that continue to plague the logging sector, Veenkamp is committed to “retaining what we have by making sure companies affected by reductions have viable alternative options. For example, in March we partnered with the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations, and Rural Development to host an open house for loggers to help them pivot, by way of providing advice and information, in order to generate income from their equipment. This led to them obtaining highway improvement work and other jobs available through the Province.”

One thing is certain: Cobb and Veenkamp derive considerable satisfaction moving their community forward while fighting to preserve its roots. “I think I speak for a lot of people when I say I can’t imagine a better place to live,” says Cobb. “We’re determined to keep it that way.” 🌲