

# FOREST COMMUNITY: PORT ALBERNI

By Jim Girvan



Photo: City of Port Alberni

**Editor's note: In this issue, we are introducing a new regular article featuring forest dependent communities in an effort to provide their perspective on the forest industry. Recently, nine communities have become TLA Associate members; given that the forest resource is core to many rural communities across the province, we are excited to share their significance here.**

When Pat Deakin, Economic Development Manager for the City of Port Alberni talks about his role, he's passionate as he details the many initiatives the city is focused on. The Port Alberni Economic Development office works to achieve a vibrant, diverse and sustainable economy in the Alberni Valley with core responsibilities including diversification of the local economy, retention and attraction of industry and commerce, and marketing opportunities for all businesses within the city.

Port Alberni is the largest city and commercial hub in the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District. Port Alberni currently has a population of more than 18,000 of the total regional population of more than 31,000. Other population centres include Tofino, Ucluelet, Bamfield and several other small communities.

The City of Port Alberni and the surrounding region thrived for several decades with an economy based on the management and processing of natural resources. The main industries were forestry, commercial fishing, and later tourism, provided a more diverse economy.

Significant changes in international commodity markets and resource availability however, resulted in challenges for many parts of the world that depend on resource use. Port Alberni responded to these challenges by developing an economy that is more diverse and flexible to changes in markets. The culture of organizations, including government, owners, managers and workers, have accepted and embraced change to protect the values that make Port Alberni great and take advantage of new opportunities to make it better.

The forest industry employs about 13 per cent of the labour force in Port Alberni and provides more than its share of wages and 20 per cent of all taxes to the community. Port Alberni and the surrounding communities are also the home of some 26 TLA member companies.

Besides the core paper and sawmilling industries represented by Western Forest Products, Catalyst Paper San Group, Franklin Forest Products, Nagaard and Nakada Trading, there are numerous spin-off companies that are tied to forestry including trucking, welding, mechanics, wire rope sellers and many

more. In addition, the Tseshaht and Hupačasath First Nations have forest operations in the Alberni Valley while the Huu-ay-aht and Uchucklesaht also have operations adjacent to, or at the edges of, the Valley.

Deakin was given two broad goals when creating an economic development plan for the City:

1. Find ways to support and increase utilization of the existing industrial infrastructure, and
2. Protect the fibre base that the paper mills and sawmills utilize.

The City developed a 9-point vision and action plan that was to be used to attract new business. Not surprisingly, eight of the nine points dealt with forestry, and specifically the opportunity to utilize post-harvest wood waste in the forests that surround the city.

"Our plan was to focus on the residual wood and provide the opportunity for businesses to develop niche market products in an eco-industrial park or cluster," notes Deakin. The park will draw upon the principles of industrial ecology to reduce the environmental footprint, as well as the operating costs



of new businesses. The goal of this initiative is to support the economic viability of existing businesses in Port Alberni, while attracting new businesses to an integrated wood and wood-biomass business cluster. “We wanted to work with companies who would utilize this wood source and then use their waste as source material for other companies,” adds Deakin.

So far, the City’s plan seems to be working as several firms are looking to establish themselves in Port Alberni.

An example is KEITEC Biowood Products Ltd., which has developed the process to extract oils from cedar sawdust and cedar wood waste. The oils are used for pharmaceutical and agricultural purposes. They have a proven technology, market and business plan and are currently looking for investors.

CanTimber Biotech Inc. is in the early stages of manufacturing activated carbon from waste wood sources. According to their website, the project utilizes retort pyrolysis technology to produce clean, high-quality charcoal. The project employs a fluidized based steam activation chamber to produce granular and powder-pure physical method wood activated carbon, that can be further refined into pharmaceutical grade, food plant grade and chemical engineering grade raw material. When the Port Alberni plant operated, it employed 20 people, however, production issues forced shutdown and they are currently re-evaluating their process in

order to market their product for use in super conductors where the value is much higher.

The City is also working with Eco-Options Energy Cooperative who have a proven technology to create bio-diesel from the same post-harvest wood waste. This firm is in the process of raising capital to develop the plant. They are also very focused on research into various harvesting methods and approaches that have the potential to improve the economics of residual wood recovery and delivery.

Port Alberni’s economic development plan also focuses on support for the many existing forest-based industries in town as well. As an example, FPIInnovations (FPI) heard about the City’s approach to increased utilization of wood waste as a means of attracting new businesses and contacted them to begin discussions about how they could help. These discussions resulted in a successful application for a Provincial Rural Dividend of \$500,000 towards research and practical ways to support existing and new industry.

An early application of this funding was used to support a waste wood chipping trial working with Catalyst Paper. Island Timberlands offered two cut-blocks to be used in the trial, and FPI worked with the logging contractor to get them to deck residual (waste) wood in one of the blocks, rather than piling, which was done in the other block. FPI then monitored productivity of decking vs piling by bringing in contractors to debark and chip the decks in one block

and piles in the other. All of the wood chips went to Catalyst, and FPI is now analyzing the data to see if the decking approach will work.

Beyond promotion of wood waste utilization, other diversification efforts in the City are being led by the Coulson Group, who are converting Boeing 737’s into water bombers for fighting forest fires. Local taxpayers have supported this by investing almost \$8 million in the expansion of the airport to allow the aircraft to take off with a full tank of retardant or water for testing purposes.

Successive mayors and members of council for Port Alberni have long been focused on the forest industry and have always made a point of attending TLA events, including the annual convention. Current Mayor Mike Ruttan saw the value of the work the TLA does and its application in cities like his. Port Alberni became a TLA member in 2017 as part of the TLA Community membership program. “The TLA supports and invests its time into improvement of the forest industry and its goals are aligned with the efforts that our City is doing to support its economic growth. Membership was a good fit for our community,” notes Ruttan.▲