

OLD FASHIONED CONVERSATION: FORESTRY COMMUNITIES REACH OUT TO INDUSTRY

By Sandra Bishop

The forests are all around them, “our backdrop” one mayor says when describing the movement local governments are leading to learn more about forestry, how the industry operates and its economic impacts.

Some say it began when the TLA welcomed Campbell River, Port McNeill, Port Hardy and Port Alberni, along with Powell River and Gibsons as associate members in 2016. (Sayward just joined in early 2017). Campbell River Mayor Andy Adams says communities recognized the TLA’s leadership and saw this as an opportunity to “work together with the Minister and the entire forest sector on how to ensure there is a viable, sustainable forest sector in our region.” Further demonstrating its own leadership at this time, Campbell River struck a Forestry Task Force “to enhance the sustainability of the forest sector and to support existing and new businesses.”

Since then, the TLA and the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) independently released survey results that

pointed out gaps in communication and community engagement.

The TLA’s research found that community leaders are frequently unsure of the province’s efforts to improve forest practices and policies, and even when they are aware they often have difficulty being heard. The TLA is committed to fostering dialogue on the critical issues that face communities and threaten the sustainability of the timber harvesting sector.

“Our fortunes go hand in hand,” says David Elstone, TLA Executive Director. “And we believe these voices should be heard.”

And so do others. Reaction has been swift and communities are reaching out to the coastal forest industry because they know the value of dialogue and are seeking an informed, balanced approach to forestry in their communities:

- In March the Regional District of Nanaimo (RDN) held “Skog Dag” at Harmac in Nanaimo to give lo-

cal government a better understanding of the forest industry’s economic impact on the RDN.

- In April the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities (AVICC) signed a landmark Memorandum of Understanding with Coast Forest Products Association to further strengthen the close ties between industry and communities.
- At AVICC’s annual convention Port McNeill harnessed the opportunity to pass a resolution to create a panel focused on the management and preservation of old-growth forests.
- AVICC’s convention, hosted by Campbell River, included a forestry workshop for delegates to support communication between community leaders and the industry and increase understanding about how the industry operates.



Skog Dag

Skog Dag is a Swedish term that means 'forest day' or a 'day in the woods.' The event was organized by Bob Rogers, a director of the Regional District of Nanaimo and retired registered professional forester, who wanted to present the facts.

The RDN's strategic plan focuses on supporting traditional industries as well as new ones, and Rogers is committed to finding the right balance and supporting industries that provide jobs and support communities and regional economies. Forty per cent of the regional economies on BC's coast rely on forestry.

"I was concerned about the awareness of local government representatives with regard to the impact of the sector, of the forest economy where we live and where we're elected by the citizens we represent as local government."

With the support of the Board and the forest sector, Rogers brought together RDN directors and staff, including the member municipalities it represents—

Nanaimo, Lantzville, Parksville and Qualicum. It also included industry representatives from large and small companies across all aspects of the industry from planning through harvesting to transportation and manufacturing, including associations and the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations.

"I thought it would be beneficial to have the forest sector come and talk about the impact of the sector on the RDN. It just brought all these parts together and gave everybody a chance to have a two-way dialogue and look at the forest sector from different perspectives."

Rogers recalls how the presenters illustrated their interconnectedness, showing how the success or failure of each of them had a domino effect on the others, and how forest industry transactions impact the business community in the RDN.

"Each presenter had a list of about 200 to 300 suppliers they access in their operations, businesses located in our communities. The whole sector

is a big employer but it also supports the business community in a huge way. Local governments are providing services in the way of planning parks and recreation, water, sewer, solid waste removal, fire protection and such. The forest sector, in a large part through employment and taxation, allows us to fund the services we provide to our communities."

Rogers says local government knew forestry matters, but Skog Dag illustrated "why it matters and how much it matters."

Ian Thorpe agrees. He's a retired teacher and school administrator of 35 years and serves as vice chair of the RDN. Prior to Skog Dag, he held "a basic understanding that forestry has always been one of the mainstays of our economy" but didn't have a lot of specific knowledge about how far reaching the industry is. Thorpe says he came away getting much more out of the day than expected because "it went beyond forest practices and stewardship to look at the economic impact of

harvesting and log transportation—tug boats and logging truck drivers, things I had never really thought of as being directly impacted by forestry.”

Rogers adds, “Forestry’s importance is central to our government deliberations. It was a great lead-up to the AVICC workshop.”

Forestry Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

The MOU between AVICC and Coast Forest Products Association is a significant milestone. It further defines the partnership between the forest sector and coastal communities by strengthening two-way engagement with respect to planning and operations at the local level and collaboration on forest policies where there is mutual agreement.

“Forestry affects us all,” comments Barbara Price, (past) President, AVICC, which has a membership of 53 local governments. “There is a real interest for our membership in what happens in our forests and certainly there was a very strong feeling [from the UBCM survey] that there was a disconnect.”

Price notes that the MOU is an important starting point for mapping a path forward. “We don’t want it to be just a dusty document. It’s all well and good to say we agree to communicate better and work together but unless you define this, it becomes meaningless...What’s understandable to a professional forester may not be understandable to a member of Council.”

Coast Forest Products Association and its 18 member companies provide more than 38,000 well-paying jobs to people that support families and communities throughout the coast. It is committed to aligning “the interests of both associations’ members to work together to deliver on the benefits of ongoing management of coastal BC’s sustainable, renewable forest resources.”

At the heart of all local government is decision-making. “I think the more we communicate, the better the outcome,” Price explains. “It doesn’t mean we’ll always agree, but once we understand where our differences are, usually you can come to solutions.”

Port McNeill Resolution

Port McNeill Mayor Shirley Ackland said “Hallelujah!” when she saw the MOU. “It was very close to the resolution that Port McNeill moved, which talks about the need for and the importance of open communication between forestry communities, large forest companies and First Nations,” Ackland explains.

The resolution, passed at AVICC, supports the formation of an advisory group consisting of First Nations groups, local government representatives from forest communities, as well as industry and environmental representatives to focus on the management and preservation of old-growth forests.

Ackland hopes the resolution will broaden the dialogue about plans in her community and fully consider the impacts of decisions that impact Port McNeill, where 80 per cent of jobs are reliant on the forest industry.

“A balance between healthy forests and healthy communities is essential and achievable,” the mayor emphasizes. “I firmly believe the more people involved in the decisions made, the better the decision. It’s hugely important that all those voices are at the table.”



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Mayor Shirley Ackland's resolution at AVICC stressed the importance of open communications between forestry communities, large forest companies and First Nations.

AVICC Forestry Workshop

As leader of Campbell River's Forestry Task Force, Councillor Charlie Cornfield helped plan a forestry workshop for AVICC's April convention, which Campbell River hosted this year. It was his mission "to provide factual, unbiased information to help communities stay up-to-date and make better informed decisions." It just so happens that the Forestry Task Force's Communications Sub-committee is also working on this for the City of Campbell River. The AVICC forestry workshop was a natural extension, an opportunity for the north Island to provide a forum for community leaders to learn about how forestry is practised in coastal BC and how other communities participate within the forest industry.

Joe Stanhope of the Regional District of Nanaimo facilitated the AVICC workshop on Forestry Management. "The panel was very diverse and provided a good cross-section of perspectives," he emphasizes. It included representatives from the First Nations Forestry Council, UBCM's Economic Development Committee, The Association of BC Forest Professionals and the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations.

"Participants went away with a better understanding of the forest industry, the definition of old-growth and what's involved in forest policy regulations and decision-making," remarks Cornfield. "Government went away with an increased awareness of the importance of having communities involved."

Rogers says everyone wins when improved communication leads to increased understanding. "I'd recommend to any community in BC to do something similar to Skog Dag for elected officials in those areas where the impact of forestry might not be so obvious. By increasing knowledge you give both elected officials and staff an awareness of how critical the forest sector is to the community's ability to provide services."

In the end, "we all have a vested interest in the sustainability of the coastal forest industry and our communities," concludes Mayor Adams.

Elstone couldn't agree more. The inclusion of local governments in the TLA membership has strengthened engagement and is leading to new approaches towards communication. "We're all stronger for it," he affirms.▲

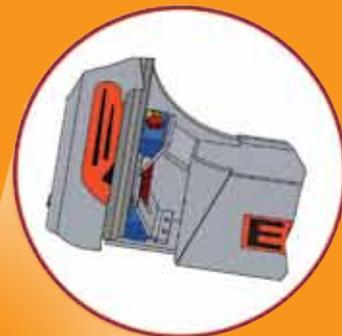
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