

FOREST COMMUNITY: PRINCE GEORGE

By Robin Brunet

When Prince George hosted the 2015 Canada Winter Games—suddenly focusing media eyes from around the world on the proud logging hub of 74,000 people—Mayor Lyn Hall realized he had been given an opportunity that couldn't be wasted.

He recalls, "I knew we would get publicity during the games (which coincided with our 100th birthday), but the media exposure was so enormous that it would be foolish not to capitalize on it. So, we doubled up on our marketing efforts, and as a result attracted more high-profile games to our neck of the woods.

"This led to a steady stream of inquiries from the business community in other parts of the province and Canada—which of course is most welcome as we continue to diversify our economy."

It has often been said there are two types of forestry towns. The first is one whose fortunes were made thanks to the forest industry but, with diversification, has distanced itself from its logging roots.

Prince George is the second type of forestry town: it too has diversified, but instead of trying to distance itself from its roots, it has embraced them. In fact, Hall and other city officials shout its benefits from the proverbial rooftops whenever they get the chance. "We regard forestry as our main strategic partner in our grand economic plan," says Melissa Barcellos, manager of economic develop-

ment for Prince George. "How could we not? We're home to the largest forestry cluster in Canada, with seven sawmills, three pulp mills, two pellet plants, the Husky oil refinery, and every conceivable related service, which combined provide government with \$800 million annually in direct revenue and employ 11,754 people, 9,000 directly in this city."

Barcellos adds, "We've also benefited from the innovations of the sector. For example, buildings in the University of Northern British Columbia [UNBC] are heated with their own bioenergy plant, and we also have a bioenergy system that heats our municipal buildings."

Perhaps more importantly, forestry is alive and well in the hearts of Prince George residents. "The most popular university programs here feed into forestry," says Barcellos. "So, although we may have diversified, we celebrate the industry that 100 years ago literally built this town and continues to push us forward."

As Hall completes his first term as mayor at the end of 2018, his jurisdiction is thriving. The latest annual stats (end of September) reveal record-level building permits of \$169.2 million (the previous record of \$147.8 million was set in 2007, prior to the global recession) and private sector development of \$135.1 million. Public spending is going toward a new public swimming pool and fire hall, as well as a new secondary school.

Additionally, Federated Co-Operatives Ltd. is developing a new bulk plant

(BCR Industrial Park) worth \$3.5 million, a \$3 million expansion was being undertaken at the Show Lounge at Treasure Cove Casino, and the University Hospital of Northern British Columbia (which, along with the BC Cancer Agency Centre for the North, has made Prince George a major centre for healthcare in the surrounding region of 320,000 people) is undergoing a \$5.2 million renovation.

Hall says, "With regard to the private sector spending, it's a good mix of commercial and industrial, and with residential construction we're seeing more multi-family development, with one downtown project alone accounting for 150 units."

Hall credits Barcellos and her development team with "supporting existing businesses and using social media and other formats to draw attention to and awareness of Prince George as a desirable place to work, live and play."

For her part, Barcellos points to the city's Move Up Prince George campaign for successfully promoting her community as a frontrunner in job creation, offering a low cost of living, exhibiting a pleasing urban appeal, and being centrally located in the province (in short, with all the amenities of a larger Canadian city—a healthy arts community, nightlife, shopping and other attributes—but none of the expense or congestion that has ruined other major metropolises).



Barcellos notes, “Several years ago we surveyed people across Canada and found that people who knew of us assumed we offered fewer jobs and a lower pay rate, when in fact the opposite is true. As a result, we’ve geared our advertising campaigns to dispel these misconceptions, and thanks to them and Move Up, the results of our latest survey conducted last year showed that Canadians are far more accurately informed about who we are and what we offer.”

If 2018 was a banner year for Prince George, it seems that even greater achievements are yet to come; anyone who follows regional news will attest to that. “Projects such as the Site C dam and the recent Liquefied Natural Gas announcements will benefit our economy; in fact, we began benefiting from the latter five or so years ago when companies moved here to survey and explore,” says Hall. “Meanwhile, our airport [Prince George YXS] is in the midst of attracting more cargo, and we continue to regard the Port of Prince Rupert as a key aspect of our growth—CN Rail moves product from that city to here, and from here it goes to all over North America.”

For the record, it also seems likely that Prince George in the foreseeable future will become home to data centres given that it is one of the very few cities in the province that meets that sector’s climate, infrastructure and redundancy requirements. “We’re trying hard to at-

tract this type of business and confident we’ll get it,” says Hall.

In the meantime, Barcellos and her colleagues will continue to spread the good word about her city as far and wide as possible. “Everything is in our favour,” she concludes. “Our transportation advantage is huge, we have lots of government services, we have plenty of

acre of forest land was being utilized, and mandated that the small and low-grade logs left in the forest be converted into pulp.

Prince George, with its existing pulp mills and plethora of debarkers and chippers, became a mecca for the development of new logging systems and equipment that would efficiently harvest smaller-diameter wood. This in turn set the stage for systems and the accompanying mindset of today that mandates treating the land base holistically.

As forestry evolved, so did the city, with many young families settling in. Then, in 1990, UNBC was created by an act of the provincial legislature, and the institution would go on to reflect the community’s forestry heritage through the creation of its Wood Innovation and Design Centre. At six storeys high, this structure proudly takes its place as one of Canada’s tallest all-wood buildings.

affordable land, and, with our art galleries, symphony orchestra, proximity to ski hills and many other amenities, we’re a great place to live, both for those in newer industries as well as people in the forestry sector.”▲