

FOREST COMMUNITY: CAMPBELL RIVER

By Robin Brunet

One evening in late June of this year, Andy Adams, mayor of Campbell River, decided to stroll through the downtown core of his city; he was soon immersed in a crowd of over 1,000 people witnessing a festive arts battle, sipping craft beer from a local brewery, and sampling wine and other delicacies from nearby boutique businesses.

Welcome to a progressive BC forestry town in the 21st century.

Adams recalls that June evening because the energetic mood was in direct contrast to events of a decade ago, when this coastal city of 35,000 people saw the closure of TimberWest's Elk Falls sawmill, followed two years later by the closure of the Catalyst paper mill and recycling operation. "That, combined with the closure of a mine and other resource businesses amounted to the loss of over 3,000 jobs in our region," he says.

But instead of fleeing to more prosperous locales en masse, Campbell River's population mainly stayed put and embarked on an economic diversification that, today, has made the city more resilient than ever.

And yet, despite the arts battles and craft businesses that have lent an almost seaside resort ambiance to Campbell River, the city still proudly celebrates its forestry roots, as it does its other famous claim to fame: "The Salmon Capital of the World." "The forestry sector is inextricably intertwined with our past and our fu-

ture," says the city's Economic Development Officer, Rose Klukas. "About 7 per cent of our population is directly employed in forestry compared to the provincial average of 2.5 per cent, and we're actively involved in promoting the sector to high school students—because we see amazing new opportunities ahead."

Campbell River, with its 16 kilometres of waterfront, is considered the hub for the coastal forest industry on Northern Vancouver Island thanks to well established infrastructure, including an extensive network of logging roads, and water links such as a deep seaport.

The city is located within the Campbell River Natural Resource District (CRNRD), and within this district are 18 timber processing facilities, 41 woodlots, and 14 First Nations tenures. The district office handles permitting for an Annual Allowable Cut of approximately 4,500,000 cubic metres, and Western Forest Products, TimberWest, Interfor, and Island Timberlands are the four main licensees who provide direct and indirect jobs (the majority being in forestry and logging) within the community. As a distinct forestry town, the city of Campbell River is a TLA member with more than 100 member companies, the highest concentration of membership in the province.

Campbell River is also home to an assortment of manufacturing companies, including T-Mar Industrial Engineering and Manufacturing, and value added

businesses such as Comox Valley Shake & Shingle. This is in addition to support and technical service firms having head offices in the city, such as Strategic Natural Resource Consultants, and Capacity Forest Management—the latter a consulting firm specializing in First Nations forestry licences.

Adams cites a strong sense of community pride as a reason for Campbell River residents staying put when the mills and mines closed, and as far as he and other city administrators were concerned, protecting their livelihoods was all-important. "So we embarked on a series of initiatives that would revitalize and diversify our economy," he says.

These initiatives included offering a downtown revitalization tax exemption for new developments and redevelopments, which would provide tax relief on the increased assessed value for up to five years. This was accompanied by infrastructure upgrades and beautification of the downtown core. The efforts paid off: by 2013, there was more than \$100 million in new construction in the city, with the value of the construction up by 72 per cent (nearly double the value of construction in 2012).

The following year, Campbell River's economy was given an additional boost with the construction of a new \$300 million hospital and the one billion, five-year reconstruction of the John Hart Dam on the outskirts of the city, the



latter of which is said to have employed more than eight hundred people in all.

By 2017, Campbell River's economic resurgence was the stuff of media headlines: the CBC in October of that year noted that job growth in the area had increased by 1,000 positions in a two-year period, with resource sector recovery (including the reopening of Nyrstar's Myra Falls mine, which had closed in 2015 so the company could review site infrastructure deficiencies) accompanied by a surge of film production on the central and north Island (which in turn prompted Campbell River's North Island College to launch a pilot program in television and film crew training).

In fact, the CBC reported that job opportunities had become so voluminous in so many sectors that North Vancouver Island overall was experiencing a labour shortage.

Klukas says Campbell River's initiatives "helped keep the lights on, and in recognition of forestry's key role in our future we persuaded the TLA to allow local governments to be associate members. That way, we could approach government on industry issues as a unified force with other communities, and have a more productive discussion on the impact of different proposed legislations."

City administrators also established a Forestry Task Force in cooperation with the local industry, First Nations and the public, to enhance the sustainability of

the forest sector and to support existing and new businesses. The task force's mandate includes: investigating the potential for a community forest licence; investigating future economic development options; and promoting non-timber forest resource business opportunities.

But arguably the most significant investment the city has made in its forestry future is in recruitment and training. "We've been staging show and tell-type visits in high schools for about 12 years now, the first one in partnership with the TLA for a school that had just launched a new forestry component," says Adams. "It's satisfying to know that some of these kids have since grown up and are now working in the industry."

Today, Campbell River is respected as a hub for forestry-related education: North Island College offers a range of technical and hands-on programs specific to coastal forestry, while the North Vancouver Island Aboriginal Training Society runs a Forestry Training BladeRunners Program for Aboriginal people and communities in the region. As Adams points out, industry education begins at the high school level, and Carihi Secondary provides a forestry program to prepare youth for entry-level jobs in the sector.

Adams and Klukas view this infrastructure as crucial to their city being able to take advantage of opportunities coming down the turnpike. "Our goal is

to train enough people to offset the huge impending vacancy in the ageing forestry workforce," says the latter.

As is the case with any forward-thinking government, its administrators are too busy looking ahead to dwell on their accomplishments—and given the challenges facing BC's forestry sector, Adams doesn't take any of the gains his city has made over the past decade lightly. "Our work is hardly over because there are so many issues brewing," he says. "The bottom line is we don't want another war in the woods; instead, we have a good message to deliver about the sustainability of our resource industries, including forestry.

"We thought last year was exceptional for business activity, but so far in 2018 we're up 29 per cent compared to 2017. Our aim is to top that next year, and in the years to come."▲