

City launches community forest blitz

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The campaign to create a Port Alberni Community Forest has kicked into the next stage, with the announcement of a community consultation process.

The city has announced it will hold a pair of open house events next month, as well as taking part in major public events, to gather feedback from the community.

That's on top of an on-line survey now available on the City of Port Alberni website (www.city.port-alberni.bc.ca), according to city clerk Russell Dyson.

"The whole idea of a community forest is that it responds to the needs of the community," Dyson told the Times last week.

To that end, the two-page survey calls on participants to rank the importance of a multitude of factors, such as recreational values, employment, wildlife habitat and viewsapes, he explained.

"Another area will be consultation with First Nations," Dyson said. "Hupacasath and Tseshaht both have experience in managing woodlands, through woodlots and through the private sector."

The campaign to obtain a community forest license began four years ago, when Franklin Forest Products owner Pat McKay began consultations with Mayor Ken McRae on securing a consistent source of timber for his mill. Speaking to the Times late Friday, McRae said it's required a great deal of persistence, dealing with the provincial forest ministry.

"At first, they said, 'No No No - not going to happen,'" McRae said Friday. "Then it began to change about two years ago."

The ministry has now identified two blocks of timber in the former MacMillan Bloedel Sproat Lake Division which, under a community forest license, could provide about 18,000 cubic metres of wood annually.

"The minister originally proposed 22,000 cm³, but the land base looks more like 18 (thousand), to be sustainable," Dyson said.

Sustainability is a major concern for Sproat Lake director Penny Cote, in whose district the timber is located.

"I was just appointed to the Advisory Committee a few months ago, so I'm just getting up to speed," Cote said.

Cote said her involvement began when a group of Sproat Lake residents expressed their concerns over logging operations within the district.

"They encouraged me to become involved in this process," Cote said. "Our residents aren't against logging, but they want to see it sustainable and environmentally-friendly. Right now, there is a lot of logging going on next to residential areas that's not - that's why our residents are so concerned."

Cote noted that, in the old MB days, local governments had no say in forestry management. And with the loss of appurtenancy clauses on public forests, which mandated local processing for local timber, it's become more important to maintain as much control as possible over the remaining forest base, she said.

"'Community forest' can also mean not logging it," Cote said. "The dynamics in the industry have all changed, with a lot of mills shutting down. The goal is to maintain local jobs by making sure these logs go to mills in our area."

"We're not going to make big bucks on it, but the money will be used to support projects in the community - the whole community," McRae said.

The city will be hosting an open house in council chambers on Sept. 17, and at Sproat Lake Community Hall on Sept. 18. The Advisory Committee will be maintaining a booth at the Alberni District Fall Fair, Sept. 6 through 9, during the annual general meeting of the South Island Woodlot Association, which will be held at Glenwood Centre, from Sept. 27 through 30.

"We'll be there on Sept. 29," Dyson said.

You can check out the Port Alberni Community Forest project by logging on to www.communityforest.ca. There is a link to the survey on the home page.

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