

PROGRESS

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June 2022

TURNING POINTS

WATERFRONT PROMISE:

Somass lands present pivot point for development

THEN AND NOW:

The transformation of Harbour Quay, and revitalization of a mall

INDIGENOUS ECONOMICS:

Uchucklesaht and Tseshaht First Nations are making things happen for the future

The IT Intrepid cable laying ship docks at Berth 3 of the Port Alberni Port Authority's terminals in May 2022. Both the IT Intrepid and IT Integrity will be fixtures at the busy port this summer. (SUSAN QUINN/ Alberni Valley News)



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PROGRESS 2022

Turning points bring fresh perspective to businesses

SUSIE QUINN
Alberni Valley News

This year's Alberni Valley News Progress edition examines pivotal moments of business in Port Alberni, and how a group of agencies, companies, First Nations and individuals are moving on from established practices to fresh perspectives.

Where once the waterfront was filled with ships motor-ing off with containers full of finished lumber products, then raw logs, now the deepsea port is just as likely to host offshore commercial fishing and tele-communications vessels.

A pair of cable-laying and repair ships belonging to IT International Telecom Inc. will berth in Port Alberni through-out the summer. The *IT Integrity* cable repair ship returns for a second summer, while the *IT Intrepid* cable-laying vessel

has already tied up at Berth 3. Not only are they using Port Alberni as a base for west coast operations, but they are an east coast customer for Canadian Maritime Engineering (CME), which has a base on the Alberni waterfront.

Waterfront property is a rare commodity, especially in Port Alberni, says Steve Dunagan, in charge of business develop-ment for CME.

"In any town that's devel-oping, (waterfront) wasn't a premium back in the day. Now it's almost impossible to find water access for any type of commercial use," says Duna-gan. His company is experienc-ing this right now as it looks to expand operations.

Sometimes, when waterfront land isn't available, resourceful people have created it. Such is the case with both the Somass lands and Harbour Quay, al-

beit for very different reasons. Both the now-defunct Somass Sawmill and Harbour Quay were built on land that wasn't originally there. The Somass, whose lands are the subject of a multi-million-dollar strate-gic vision for the City of Port Alberni, was built on a vast mudflat.

The Quay, which opened in August 1984 as a retail and commerce area, sits on built-up land important to the rich history of the Tseshaht First Nation.

While the city sits on a cusp of change with regard to its waterfront development, other entities have either undergone or are in the midst of such pro-cesses. Charlene Patterson of Char's Landing can attest to that: a decade ago she took a dream of a performance venue with adjacent lodging and transformed an historic

church into a sought-after hall and hostel.

The Uchucklesaht Tribe Government had an imme-diate need for more space for its operations, and knew the perfect place: the former Red-ford School on Redford Street, between Fourth and Fifth Av-enues. They have been busy transforming the old school into an award-winning multi-use complex.

When Alberni Mall closed in the late 1990s/ early 2000s, many thought it was the death of the shopping mall. Over the past two decades the mall has found a new identity, and wel-comed its latest tenant, Wendy's just last month.

Each story in this issue un-covers a turning point, where something that once was trans-forms into something new, and how facets of our community have embraced change.



Port Alberni's city council envisions public access to the waterfront with a Quay to Quay pathway and multi-use land where Somass Sawmill has been for nearly a century. (SUSAN QUINN/ Alberni Valley News)

Gem on the water

SUSIE QUINN
Alberni Valley News

Bring up the subject of waterfront property in Port Alberni, and peo-ple think of two things: recreational land on Sproat Lake, and heavy industry along Alberni Inlet.

A 43-acre plot of prime water-front in the heart of the city, known as the Somass lands, is the focal point of opportunity these days. Formerly home to a sawmill for

more than 70 years, the mill lay dormant for five years until city leaders decided to reclaim the land.

"That piece of waterfront is why I ran for mayor," says Sharie Min-ions, whose first term as mayor will be up in October 2022. There were competing interests over the dor-mant sawmill from fellow members of council during Minions' term as a councillor, prompting her to enter the mayoral race in 2018.

Continued on B4

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Somass sawmill site 'a pivotal piece of land'

Continued from B3

"The Somass Sawmill shut down during my term on council. I saw it as an incredible opportunity for the future of the community to really go in a new direction, an intentional direction," she said.

This present council isn't the only faction to see value in this particular tract of land. Pre-contact, the Tseshaht claimed a wide swath of the waterfront from down the Alberni Canal all the way up the Somass River to Sproat Lake. Some of the haa huulthi or territory, according to elder Ernie Lauder (as written down by Annie Watts in a history of Tseshaht), was absorbed as "spoils of war" after defeating the yashitkwu?ath and ts'ooma?as?ath.

A winter village and ceremonial site for Tseshaht First Nation stretched from what is known as Argyle Street along the waterfront. When colonial settlers arrived up the Alberni Inlet, they too saw value in the area and forced the Indigenous population to move further up

the Somass River. In the early 1860s, the Anderson Company sawmill replaced ceremonial activities such as the Tlookwaana, or Wolf Ritual, and others that marked the end of the annual salmon runs.

The land where the former Somass Sawmill sits was a mud-soaked tidal flat until the early 1930s. Great Central Sawmills Ltd. decided to build a new mill just north of the failed Spratt Sawmill. The deepsea nature of the harbour was a draw, and the company wanted a way to ship its product to developing markets overseas. The undeveloped land was also close to the railway.

Truck loads of gravel were brought in to create a berm around the mudflats. They were then dredged in June 1934 to back-fill the dike and reveal the land. "Everything that was built on the property was built on pilings," said local historian Ken Rutherford. "All the buildings were built on pilings."

The mill opened in early 1935; it didn't become "So-



Port Alberni Mayor Sharie Minions, right, and other council members Ron Corbeil, left, city director of development services Scott Smith, councillors Cindy Solda, Ron Paulson, Deb Haggard and Helen Poon (missing: Dan Washington) gather on a foggy winter day to celebrate the city officially taking over the Somass Sawmill lands. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

mass Sawmill" until 1953 after a merger between logging companies.

Rutherford began working at the Somass Sawmill in 1967 and retired after 38 years. He was one of four generations to work at the mill, starting when it opened. "This was the only land that hadn't been developed where you could put

infrastructure on it," he said of the attraction for the site.

Almost 80 years later, the city's leaders still see the land as a vital piece of the waterfront. "Council sees this as a pivotal piece of land," Minions said. "It's open space, waterfront access for the community, potential residential" and light industry. There is a shortage of

Council sees this as a pivotal piece of land.

– Sharie Minions

light industrial land on Vancouver Island, making the Somass lands attractive to numerous developers.

Ten months ago Minions, with council firmly behind her, announced the city's intention to expropriate the property if Western Forest Products wasn't going to restart the mill.

The mill had been shuttered for five years at that point with no plans in sight to restart it. The two parties reached an agreement, and Western began the process of dismantling the mill. The city formally took over the property in February 2022.

Developing the waterfront has been part of the city's strategic plan for the past 20 years. They are considering next steps, which includes demolishing the

old mill and remediating the site to the point of receiving a certificate of compliance.

Roland Smith has been a vocal critic of the city's plans for a multi-use path connecting Victoria Quay to Harbour Quay, with a waterfront portion ostensibly running across the Somass lands.

He calls it an expensive move. Smith said the city has exposed taxpayers to "potential costly environmental cleanup" at the same time as the tax revenue hit. The city maintains the environmental cleanup bill for the site will only be around one million dollars, and there are numerous skeptics. Minions says the city has environmental reports on the site, but they cannot share some of the information due to a non-disclosure agreement that was a condition of sale.

"We're not letting vocal negativity stop progress," she says. "We have to balance that with being leaders that have a strategic plan with a bigger vision for the community."



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Two 85-foot commercial fishing vessels receive final outfitting at Canadian Maritime Engineering's facility at Canal Beach in May 2022. (SUSAN QUINN/ Alberni Valley News)

CME makes progress on the waterfront

Shipbuilders talk expansion—again

SUSIE QUINN
Alberni Valley News

Commercial maritime business is booming in Port Alberni, and Canadian Maritime Engineering is one of the companies leading the way.

"I would say there's as much interest as there's ever been, maybe even a little bit more" on the city's waterfront, says Steve Dunagan, in charge of business development for CME.

Port Alberni is one of three locations CME has on Vancouver Island: there is an office in Victoria and they have taken over the former Nanaimo Shipyard. In Port Alberni, CME has three sites: the original Bird Street location across from the Port Alberni Train Station, Shed 2 on the Port Alberni Port Authority's Harbour Road property, and a large-vessel manufacturing facility on Plywood Road at Canal Beach.

"We are currently at just about 100 employees for this location in Port Alberni," said Dunagan. "We are continuing to hire; we're looking to get another 20-40 people."

Canadian Maritime Engineering has cultivated a relationship with North Island College (NIC) that will see a number of welding students join the company after graduation.

Groups of four to six students will begin training with CME

We are currently at just about 100 employees... we're looking to get another 20-40 people.

— Steve Dunagan

this summer; another NIC welding cohort begins at the end of August with the prospect of more students next year.

The partnership is a win-win: NIC students gain on-the-job experience, while CME will have people to work on some of the numerous projects they have on the go at any one time.

The engineering and manufacturing company has a number of contracts underway, both at Shed 2 on Harbour Road as well as Canal Beach. The company is working on its largest contract ever for the oil and gas industry, with eight new builds of ice-capable boats destined for northern Alberta.

"We also have a contract in hand and are about halfway through construction of eight to 10 aluminum oil recovery barges for the Canadian Coast Guard," Dunagan said. The first two were

moved outside the Canal Beach building at the end of May.

They are also building an 11-metre, self-propelled buoy recovery barge for the Canadian Coast Guard.

Canadian Maritime Engineering has three new dozer work boats underway for forestry companies within B.C. as well as seven, 18-foot superwinders under construction for local logging companies or for individual sale.

The company has been so busy they are looking at expanding their buildings in Port Alberni, says Dunagan. "We're expanding both locations with more buildings. You'll see a new 80-foot-by-45-foot building going up at Canal Beach. We're putting up more tent-style buildings behind Shed 2 for outfitting and painting."

More development is planned for the Canal Beach site: CME is working with Fisheries and Oceans and other government agencies for approval to install a travel lift.

"It would replace our lifts (at the Bird Street site). The travel lift would be capable of (handling) about 450 tonnes, which is equal to the biggest boat we could haul here, but down there we could haul multiple boats.

"The long-term goal would be to replace this aging infrastructure with something more modern down at Canal Beach."



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PROGRESS 2022

Historic church's metamorphosis into a music venue

By HEATHER WARREN
Special to the AV News

When Charlene Patterson first stepped into the former First Methodist Church on Argyle Street in 2010 she immediately saw its potential. The historic church, which dates back to 1912, was now 'Antiques in the Abbey' and filled floor to ceiling with precious antiques. The contents made it hard to see the detailed layout of the building but she loved the space.

She had just taken early retirement after 14 years in the cruise ship industry and was looking to start a venture of her own. Friends had introduced her to Port Alberni and she was impressed by the sense of community and beauty of the place.

"I had always had a dream of buying a piece of land near the ocean where I could live and run a business," she says.

She closed the deal and started planning the transformation. Blueprints in hand, she got approval from the municipality and embarked on an ambitious plan to repurpose the space to create a bed and breakfast, a suite to live in and a performance venue.



Charlene Patterson welcomes visitors to Char's Landing on Argyle Street in Port Alberni. Patterson had a vision to transform an historic church into a live music venue in Port Alberni's Rotary Arts District. (HEATHER WARREN/ Special to the AV News)

She was unfazed by the scope of the project as she had been involved in similar projects in the cruise industry. At the end of each cruise the ships underwent updates of all systems. Her role was to manage the retrofit of updated information technology and she worked alongside the trades that were working on other areas.

"I always thought of the build-

ing as a ship," she says. "It was the same, replacing the electrical and the plumbing, lighting, sound system."

There were 23 interior doors to remove, hallways to open up and the roof line was changed on the front of the building. Whenever possible Char opted to repurpose rather than replace and tried to retain the space's character by ensuring the new blended into the existing structure.

Electrical and plumbing upgrades were complete. When the last of the drywall dust had settled, the modest church had been turned into a unique venue and home. The B&B rooms were put in on the lower level.

The eclectic interior of the venue features illuminated mermaids hanging from the ceiling, stained glass panels, and a bank of old-fashioned stage lights. The seating is a mix of pews, tables and chairs and comfortable leather couches.

Over the years the performance hall has become a fixture in the community, showcasing live performances, hosting community events and providing a meeting place for various organizations, while the room rentals took a back seat. When Fat Salmon Backpackers, the only hostel in town, closed a few years ago, Char shifted gears. She turned the bed and breakfast at Char's Landing into a hostel. This part of the business had been slowly gaining momentum over the years but 2020 was its best year ever, revenue-wise. For 2022 she has re-branded as 'Char's Landing Hall & Hostel' and made improvements to the hostel facilities.

This focus on the hostel part of the business hasn't detracted from

Char's drive to promote live performances. She continues with her regular Electric Mermaid series on the last Wednesday of each month, which allows writers to read from their works to an audience for up to five minutes, either in person or over zoom. As performers slowly come out of a COVID-19- forced hibernation, she is hosting more and more in-person concerts. Some performers, such as blues boss David Gogo and iconic folk singer Valdy go out of their way to add tour dates at Char's Landing, drawn by the rich, warm acoustics of the former church sanctuary.

A hands-on owner-operator, Char has worked hard to recreate the sense of community at her hall and hostel that was lost over two hard years of global pandemic closures and restrictions. She recently began holding weekly jazz nights on Sundays, recreating the vibe of the piano jazz bars that she enjoyed so much on the cruise ships.

"I've been trying to get that together for so long," she laughs. "I'm really enjoying them. I consider it my night off."

Heather Warren is a freelance writer living in Port Alberni.

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PROGRESS 2022

Deepsea port bursts with new tenants

SUSIE QUINN
Alberni Valley News

The Port Alberni Port Authority is so busy it's running out of space. And that's an enviable position to be in, says Mike Carter, PAPA's vice-president of operations.

"We are close to maximum capacity," he said.

Independent Seafood Canada Corporation ties up two frozen-at-sea factory ships and leases property at Shed No. 1, at the far end of the port. "They've been here since about 2013. Each of those vessels have a crew on board of about 20 personnel," Carter said. They offload every eight or nine days and bring in an additional 20-30 people to the dock.

"That's created a tremendous amount of employment dating back to 2013," says Carter. The second vessel was added in spring of 2020, doubling the employment and bringing new people relocating to Port Alberni.

Next to them is Canadian Maritime Engineering, which

leases Shed 2 and in late 2021 added an outdoor lease with a portion of the dock in front of the shed.

Shed 3 is home to the Uchucklesaht First Nation's Thunderbird Spirit Water bottling facility, and the Uchucklesaht also leases an outdoor area. "We're in negotiations right now about building another building to enhance their product," Carter said.

Shed 3 and an older building adjacent to it were once part of the failed Cantimber Biotech activated carbon facility; for the past three years the older part has housed INEO Employment's mattress recycling program. Coastal Restoration Society is leasing a small compound from the port as well.

"Things have sure changed here just from our commodities. It's becoming more green," he said. "The tide has changed; these are great environmental initiatives. We're doing things in a better way here."

Berth 2 is available for tie-ups,



The IT Intrepid cable-laying ship docks at Berth 3 (SanTerm) at Port Alberni Port Authority in late May 2022. (SUSAN QUINN/ Alberni Valley News)

but the dock is no longer in good enough shape for offloading product. The port is applying for grants to revitalize Berth 2 for the future, Carter said, and there is potential for a long-term lease.

The Western Canada Marine Response Corporation commissioned a new office and warehouse at the port in May 2021, bringing 17-20 full-time employees to town. The WCMRC also built a pocket marina off the Water Street dock, about 500

metres away, to moor its spill response vessels.

"Other than CME, most of them are new since 2013, and three of those companies are new within the last two and a half to three years," said Carter. "That's a tremendous amount of employment in 800 metres of road."

The port hasn't seen as much cargo shipping in and out as it would like in the past year, said Carter, although numbers have

slowly climbed back to post-COVID-19 levels. There is a hopeful shift taking place. IT International Telecom Inc.'s cable ships will be in and out of Port Alberni throughout the summer. Canadian Maritime Engineering is a leader in the maritime industry, and the work they do brings in different contractors and vendors, sparking a triple economy for the waterfront: bringing in vessels, paying local contractors to work on the vessels and stimulating the local economy with provisions for crew.

San Terminals Inc., an offshoot of San Group Inc., took over operation of Port Alberni Terminals on July 1 2021. SanTerm has a long-term lease of the deepsea berth and terminal area, and has spent the past 11 months working behind the scenes on a business plan. This includes attracting new customers, seeking federal approval from Canada Border Services Agency for the import of cargo and developing short sea shipping via barge between Port Alberni, the Lower

Mainland and west coast ports in the United States and Mexico.

"There's a lot of stuff happening but we haven't put it across the dock yet," said Joe Spears, general manager of San Terminals.

San's main focus in taking over the shipping terminal and investing millions of dollars in upgrades is to be able to ship the lumber products they make in Port Alberni as well as from the recently-purchased Acorn Sawmill in Delta.

"There is a great deal of interest in making use of this federal facility that has been in continuous operation since 1947," said Spears.

"I'm confident we will see some activity above and beyond the log ships...within the next few months," says Carter.

While the port has invested time in leasing its property, that's not the only source of revenue, says Carter. The port operates five marinas, China Creek Campground and the Dock+ food hub, including an ice plant.




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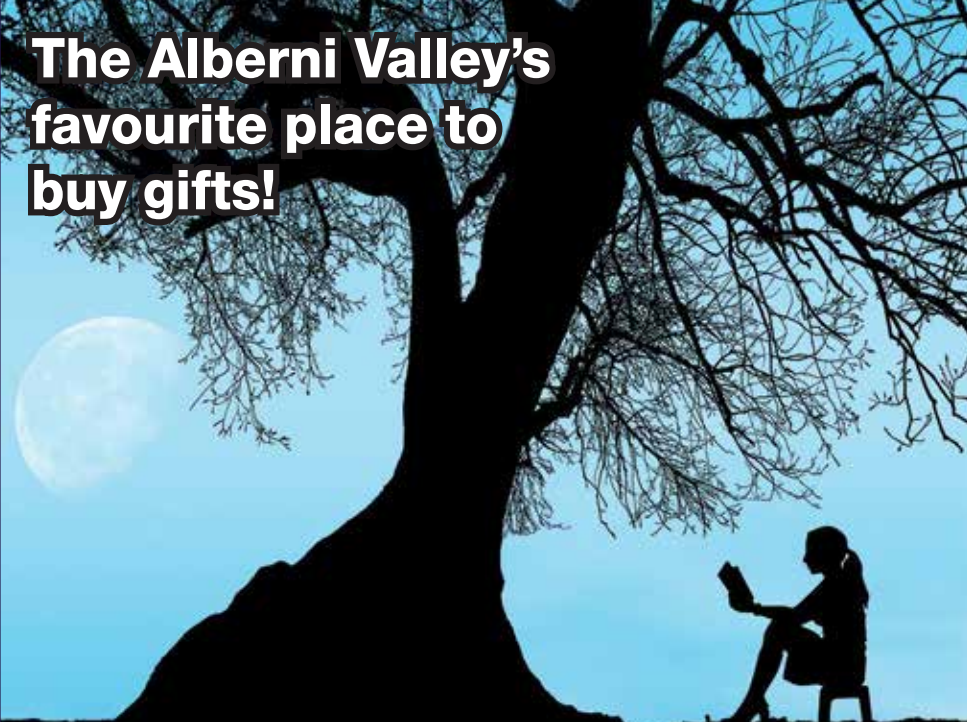


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Harbour Quay marks new era

ELENA RARDON
Alberni Valley News

On August 11, 1984, Harbour Quay officially opened at the foot of Argyle Street in Port Alberni. More than 3,000 people attended the day of celebration, including federal, provincial and municipal dignitaries and representatives.

At the time, Mike Ketteringham, chairman of the Harbour Quay commission, described the quay as, “A place for people and a place for commerce and trade.”

Later this month, the City of Port Alberni and Tseshaht First Nation will be celebrating a new era of Harbour Quay, as they unveil the newly renovated Story Tower just in time for National Indigenous Peoples Day.

Prior to European contact in Port Alberni, a winter village and ceremonial site for Tseshaht First Nation lay at the foot of Argyle Street and along the waterfront. Each winter, the Tlookwaana, or Wolf Ritual, was performed there.

Upon the arrival of English schooner *Meg Merrilies* and Edward Stamp in 1860, the Tseshaht people were displaced from their village so that Port Alberni's first sawmill could be built in its place. The Tseshaht people have not been able to perform the Wolf Ritual there for more than 100 years.

The Re-awakening of Tlukwatk-wu7is (Wolf Ritual Beach) will take place from dawn to dusk on Tuesday, June 21, which is also National Indigenous Peoples Day in Canada. Tseshaht says in a press release that they expect to welcome upwards of 1,000 people to Harbour Quay for the celebration. Neighbouring nations and other dignitaries will paddle their chiefs to the ceremonial grounds from their own territory, or launch from Clutesi Haven Marina and be escorted to shore by Tseshaht Beach Keepers for a traditional welcoming protocol.

Breakfast, lunch and snacks will be served throughout the day, as well as a traditional feast of salmon and seafood for dinner. There will be crafters, artisans and Indigenous-focused small businesses selling their wares. Tseshaht will be performing songs and dances, and Tseshaht has invited other Nations and cultures to take the floor and share theirs as well.

Everyone is welcome to attend the Re-awakening of Tlukwatk-wu7is.

The main event on June 21 will be the unveiling of the Wolf



A photo from the grand opening of Harbour Quay on August 11, 1984. The newly-constructed clock tower can be seen in the background. (PHOTO COURTESY JERRY FEVENS)



Contractors work on the Harbour Quay Story Tower on May 25, 2022. (ELENA RARDON / ALBERNI VALLEY NEWS)

Tower, or Story Tower, which was formerly the clock tower at Harbour Quay. It springs from a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that was signed between the city and Tseshaht back in 2018. The clock on the tower will be replaced with artwork designed by Tseshaht artist Willard Gallic Jr. and manufactured by Electron Metalworks. The artwork depicts the Tseshaht wolf ritual.

“It’s really a reconciliation initiative, to talk about what happened and to showcase that art,” explained Port Alberni’s economic development manager Pat Deakin.

The clock tower was donated in part to the city from the estate of former Alberni Valley Times owner and publisher Fred Duncan. The city reached out to the relatives of Duncan in 2018 and received their blessings to change the look of the tower.

Since the 1890s, the harbour

area has been a commercial and industrial centre for Port Alberni. In the 1980s, the city had a vision for a “hub” for tourists and the local community, and construction of Harbour Quay began. It was funded by federal and provincial grants, along with financial contributions from the city and the Port Alberni Harbour Commission (a precursor to the Port Alberni Port Authority). The total cost of the project was more than \$2 million.

Over the years, Harbour Quay has undergone many changes. A fountain and sculpture by Babe Gunn was commissioned by the city and unveiled in 1992. Shipwreck Park was built in 1991, although it was removed in the early 2000s after the wood began to rot. A boardwalk was added in 2010, and Spirit Square was also constructed around the same time. Centennial Pier—originally constructed as a breakwater to

protect vessels docked at Fisherman’s Harbour from damage—opened in 2012.

An aquarium was opened in 2016, although it was forced to close earlier this year due to a lack of funding and complications from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Various businesses and merchants have come and gone, moved and expanded over the past three decades. Just this year, two new businesses—Witchy Woman Supply Co. and Wesco Foods—opened in Spirit Square.

But the city does not yet have a long-term plan for the area, although it budgets annual maintenance of Harbour Quay.

Deakin says there has been talk throughout the years about how to make the Quay more attractive and pedestrian-friendly, but the budget has not been in place to implement this. It will most likely have to wait until after October’s municipal election, he said.

“It really does need a broader vision,” said Deakin.

Tseshaht First Nation will be one of the Quay’s newest residents, as the Nation plans to open a kiosk in Spirit Square next to Grassroots Fresh Food and Drinks.

Darrell Ross, Tseshaht’s natural resource manager, says the kiosk will be used as a “mini museum,” touching on key Tseshaht history and showing off some historic artifacts from past archeological digs.

“We hope to canvas Tseshaht so that we will have a good mixture of artisans, knowledge keepers and authors hosting at the kiosk, creatively integrating Tseshaht history in all Tseshaht arts,” said Ross.

Fresh ideas sought for city’s train station

ELENA RARDON
Alberni Valley News

The City of Port Alberni may be looking for someone to lease its historic train station, but there is still hope for the future of tourist train operations in the city.

The city issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) on March 30, 2022, inviting businesses, individuals and organizations to submit their proposals with a new, commercial vision for the building.

“We think it’s a phenomenal opportunity for somebody to showcase their business,” said Pat Deakin, the city’s economic development manager.

The site is essentially a “shell,” with the original 1911 rail station building and the adjoining 1950s truck garage included in the offering. The RFP also includes the paved courtyard outside and the attached parking lot.

The successful applicant will be able to transform the train station interior, but because the building has heritage status, there are some features that cannot be altered.

Deakin says the city is “wide open” to any responses that might come in.

“We’re fully expecting one or more brewpubs or restaurants to be interested,” he said. “But we thought it would be a great space for an outdoor recreation business, too.”

Port Alberni Mayor Sharie Minions said it has been “mostly food service” ideas coming forward so far.

“Which we think is exciting and fits really well with the values council is trying to accomplish

down there,” she added. Minions describes the train station as the “coolest building” in the community.

“It’s such an asset,” she said. “Yet we’ve never really been able to go in and out of it on a regular basis. It’s been closed, other than the odd special event. What I’m looking for is vibrancy out of that building, the public being welcomed into that building day by day. And just for it to add to the community.”

But the change in operations does not necessarily mean the passenger train service is going anywhere.

“We’ve been telling proponents that their response must allow for train operations again in the future, should they come to pass,” explained Deakin. “Council intends that the train would be operational again at some point in the future. We hope that it will be.”

The RFP specifically states that proponents must be prepared to operate their venture alongside a passenger rail service. Proposals must describe how operations might facilitate train operations—for example, allowing use of the washrooms and facilitating ticket sales.

“It’s important to note we do envision there still being a train ticket centre there,” said Minions. “We hope to get the train up and running and the tracks repaired at some point. We want to make sure whatever goes in there, that we’ll be reserving space for that when needed.”

The city will remain as the owner of the train

Continued on B9

PROGRESS 2022

Passenger rail still a possibility for city

Continued from B8

station and grounds.

The train station was built in 1911-12 to assist with passenger and freight rail travel in Port Alberni in the first half of the 20th century. Some additions were made in the 1950s, including a brick exterior and metal roof. The Canadian Pacific Railway closed down the train station in the 1980s as truck freight traffic took the place of rail.

The City of Port Alberni purchased the property in 1990 and the Western Vancouver Island Industrial Heritage Society (IHS) restored the station to its original wooden appearance.

“We wanted to convert [the train station] back to its original look,” said Ken Rutherford, one of the IHS founding members. “That became the home of the Industrial Heritage Society and the tourist hub for operating the steam train.”

Over the years, the IHS has run tours on the railway tracks, including tours out to McLean Mill National Historic Site. The society transformed the upper floor of the train station—which originally hosted bedrooms for the station agent—to a meeting space, while the lower floor was reserved for ticket sales, souvenirs and displays. The IHS also used the truck garage to store some of their restored trucks and artifacts.

But in 2018, the city’s No. 7 Baldwin steam locomotive had to be shut down, as it was in need of a boiler replacement. In 2019, Port Alberni city council put a temporary halt to tourist railway operations due to budget concerns. Council budgeted to bring back the tourist train for a shortened run in 2020, but these plans were halted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We hope to get the train up and running and the tracks repaired at some point.

– Sharie Minions



The E&N Railway Station on the corner of Argyle St. and Kingsway as it looked from 1952 to 1990, prior to restoration. (ALBERNI VALLEY MUSEUM / PN14127)

By October of 2021, the IHS was required to vacate the building so that repairs could take place. The train station has been undergoing some seismic upgrades over the past few months after the city received a grant of almost \$400,000 in provincial funding to undertake the work. The city started to issue a request

for expressions of interest for the train station in 2020, but this changed after city staff discovered the amount of restoration work that had to be done for the train station to be occupied.

“We decided we were going to take care of those ourselves,” said Deakin. In the meantime, Rutherford said

the steam train engine has been rebuilt, and the No. 7 is ready to go. The city put “a considerable amount of money” into getting it back up and running, he said.

However, the track and rail cars—which have been sitting unused for several years—will need some maintenance before the passenger train service can return.

Minions said the city did not receive a budget request from the IHS in 2022, so she does not have a timeline for rail service.

“I know [the IHS] has made some great progress there,” she said. “But there’s a lot of work to be done.”

Rutherford says the IHS is still interested in getting the train back up and running.

“To have an historic steam train taking visitors out to an historic steam sawmill and see an historic steam logging show—that is unique to anywhere in the world,” he said. “Nobody else has that. And right now, we’ve lost that.”

— with files from Susie Quinn, Alberville Valley News



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PROGRESS 2022

Uchucklesaht breathes new life into Redford site

ELENA RARDON
Alberni Valley News

Over the past four years, the Uchucklesaht Tribe Government has transformed a vacant elementary

school in the centre of Port Alberni to an award-winning, multi-use building.

Uchucklesaht purchased the former Redford School back in 2018.

The property is made up of a cluster of buildings on a parcel on Redford Street between Fourth and Fifth Avenues. The building had previously been owned by the Salvation Army,

then the Coulson Group, before it was purchased by Uchucklesaht.

It's not the first time Uchucklesaht has transformed a vacant building in Port Alberni. In 2014, the government purchased the former

“We were able to work with [Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council] to identify the spacing they would need and we renovated the office space to fit their needs in order to enter a lease agreement,” explained Anaka.

For the most part, said Anaka, the renovations are complete, although there is still some landscaping work to be done this summer. This will include beautification, signage and lighting of the property.

“We're quite proud of the renovations we've done,” said Anaka. “We're proud of how we've increased the aesthetic value of the Redford property. It's been sitting relatively vacant for several years. We cleaned it up and there's new life and new activity there, which we're pleased to see.”

“The Thunderbird building set the community standards,” added Uchucklesaht economic development manager David McCormick.

And Uchucklesaht is being recognized for that investment. They received an Award of Merit at the Vancouver Island Real Estate Board's Commercial Building Awards for Building C, which is located on the Redford Street and Fifth Avenue corner. The building is currently being leased by NTC.

In addition to Nucii, the Uchucklesaht Tribe Government has been working on a number of other initiatives in Port Alberni, from a sales network and marketing plan for Thunderbird Spirit Water to a new partnership with Cascadia Seaweed.

Uchucklesaht has also received funding from Island Coastal Economic Trust and Indigenous Services Canada to complete a new strategic economic development plan. The plan is currently underway, says McCormick.

“The Nucii development is part of that,” he said. “In terms of how we can build on the assets and activities already taking place to generate additional revenue for the nation that is invested back into services and programs for citizens.”

The strategic plan should be complete by early fall.





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Nucii Building C, which is located on the Redford Street and Fifth Avenue corner, received an award of merit at the VIREB Commercial Building Awards. (ELENA RARDON / ALBERNI VALLEY NEWS)

PROGRESS 2022

Rebirth of a mall

Alberni Mall, built on memories and community, now thrives on reinvention

SUSIE QUINN
Alberni Valley News

The 10th Avenue Plaza, where Shoppers Drug Mart is now located, was the first “mall” built in Port Alberni. The Alberni Mall on Johnston Road was the second. And while 10th Avenue Plaza still has a number of businesses in operation, anchored at each end by Scotiabank and Shoppers Drug Mart, it doesn’t have the lingering caché of the big mall at the north end of the city.

“It was a gathering place,” recalled Cindy Solda, a councillor with the City of Port Alberni and Solda family member by marriage. The iconic Solda’s Restaurant was one of the first places to go into the mall when it first opened, and it was one of the last to leave, she said.

Kenn Whiteman ran youth projects for the federal government’s Youth Employment Strategy from 1998-2001, moving to the mall after the first couple of years. “We had anywhere from eight to 15 young people working on community events at the mall,” he said. “Anything to do with bringing people into the mall.”

Halloween and Christmas parties were popular with families. The centre court hosted events like the Boy Scouts’ soapbox derby, baby photo competition and celebrations for numerous community groups. “The mall was the focal point of the whole community,” said Whiteman. “It was a place to go to: when it was raining people would go there to walk.”

When the mall closed, around 2000 when Walmart and Pacific



Jan Lavertu, owner of Westcoast Home Hardware in Port Alberni, says moving to the second anchor spot at the revamped Alberni Mall was a good move. (SUSAN QUINN/ Alberni Valley News)

Rim Centre across the street were being developed, many of the stores moved into locations around town: places like Capelli Hair Design, Solda’s, Twin Travel, Salmonberry’s Emporium and Mark’s Work Warehouse.

“De-malling” is not a new trend: large malls with interior retail spaces are becoming sparse as franchises and chain stores look at opening individual stores with their own entrances.

While some lament the change to Port Alberni’s mall, others, like Jan Lavertu of Westcoast Home

The mall was the focal point of the whole community.

– Kenn Whiteman

Hardware, welcomed it. He announced in the spring of 2012 that he was going to take over the 8,000-square-foot area that was formerly Safeway, creating a second anchor to the mall revitalization. Canadian Tire already anchored the other side of the mall.

“We were landlocked (on Third Avenue),”



Ron Paulson, Port Alberni city councillor, cuts the ribbon to officially open the new Wendy’s restaurant in the Alberni Mall complex, May 23, 2022. (JERRY FEVENS PHOTO)

Lavertu said. “We felt this part of the community (North Port) was where most of the retail commerce was going to be. It made sense to

catalyst for development. The Brick owner Garth Hamilton moved his store from Third Avenue into a larger space at Alberni Mall. As interior spaces were renovated into individual storefronts, different businesses moved in and out. Boston Pizza was built. In 2021 BMO moved its bank into a new building on the property, now operated by Bayfield Property Management Inc. On May 23, 2022 Wendy’s opened its much-anticipated fast food restaurant beside BMO and in front of Home Hardware.

There is only one vacant storefront at the mall, says Lavertu, making the transformation of Alberni Mall almost complete.

Home Hardware’s commitment to the revamped mall was the

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