

«PROGRESS '23

The 'blue' economy

Community of Port Alberni poised to make the switch from forests to ocean

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Alberni Valley News

The community of Port Alberni is no stranger to industry.

Port Alberni was home to the first export sawmill in the province, and for a long time forestry was the main employer in the Alberni Valley. However, a decline in the forest industry that started in the 1980s has led to a decline in the city's overall economy.

Enter the blue economy.

Over the past few years, ocean-based industry leaders have been shifting from an extraction-based model to a regeneration-based model. The "blue economy" strategy aims to create middle-class jobs in ocean-based communities, while pushing for healthier oceans and sustainable ocean industries.

Port Alberni has seen an increase in these ocean-based industries, from ship-building to seaweed aquaculture to a food processing hub on the community's waterfront. Chris Baker, the owner of Alberni Yachts, wants to be a part of generating some excitement on the waterfront by bringing the yachting industry to Port Alberni as well.

Baker previously worked in municipal government, but has a background in yachting and sailing. When he gained a job working for the City of Port Alberni in 2021, he discovered that the community has an opportunity to take its place among the most highly-respected yacht building locations in the world. Not only does Port Alberni have a deep water port, Baker explained, but it also has room to expand.

"Coming to Port Alberni and seeing the capacity that exists right now on the waterfront, it looks to a lot of people's eyes like there's a lot of opportunity there to make things happen," explained Baker.

He has been in discussions with Canadian Maritime Engineering, which has been expanding its shipyard operations on the waterfront, and has partnered with the award-winning yacht designer Ron Holland. Alberni Yachts plans to enter the market with a 65-foot model, although some project planning has to be finished up before a prototype can be launched.

Most notably, the yachts will be zero emissions, with an aluminum hull built around battery room. The batteries will be able to be replaced, giving the yachts a life cycle of around 50 years or more.

"That foresight is new to the industry," said Baker. "Our company intends to lead in terms of social and



Crews with Coastal Restoration Society work to remove "ghost gear" or abandoned fishing gear from the Alberni Inlet in February 2023. (PHOTOS COURTESY HEATHER MILLIGAN)

environmental responsibility in this space. We're hoping to show a better path and I think there's no better place than Port Alberni to do it."

Coastal Restoration Society also sees an opportunity in Port Alberni, as it selected the city last year as its Vancouver Island hub.

Coastal Restoration Society runs a variety of restoration-based initiatives in Canada's waters, removing anthropological debris and derelict vessels from the water, cleaning up shorelines and managing invasive species. Workers with CRS could be spotted on Port Alberni's waterfront in February of this year, pulling "ghost gear" or abandoned fishing gear out of the Alberni Inlet.

The society is in the planning stages of another round of shoreline cleanups along the Alberni Inlet and is also setting up projects for mitigation and control of invasive European green crabs in the Alberni Valley.

Coastal Restoration Society is also continuing to restore the old Bank of Montreal (BMO) building on Third Avenue, with an anticipated opening date in October. The new building will be "visually stunning," says Captain Josh Temple, executive director



of CRS, with First Nations artwork and murals along the outside. Coastal Restoration Society is putting almost \$2 million into the renovations.

"It will be a big change from what that building used to look like," said Temple. "It will be a community resource to access information about Coastal Restoration Society, where

we'll be able to offer specialized training and house our staff. It will be absolutely stunning when it's done."

Temple comes from an industrial background, as he spent many years working as a professional mariner and fisherman. But when he started to notice a "drastic decline" in the industry's productivity, he started to

network with colleagues in the industry and turned his focus from a harvesting perspective to sustainability.

"I wanted to look at what I can do to help sustain and help recover the ocean environment from years of industrial impact," he said.

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The Alberni Yachts team: from left to right, Ron Holland (yacht designer), Laura Fuge (naval architect) and Chris Baker (owner). (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

Port Alberni in perfect place to become an economic hub

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Coastal Restoration Society “started very small” back in 2018, said Temple, but quickly grew into a national organization, with projects developed and implemented from Canada’s west coast to its east coast.

“But our goals have always remained the same,” Temple added. “We want to achieve a balance between ecological impact and economy. Maintaining an equilibrium between the two is our primary focus.”

Another is to uplift and prioritize First Nations communities along the coast. Coastal Restoration Society relies on Indigenous partnership and consultation and follows the environmental stewardship goals of local First Nations, who Temple says are “best positioned” to guide, direct, implement and financially benefit from the growth and development of the marine restoration industry.

Temple says he selected Port Alberni as a hub last year partly because of their strong partnerships with the Tseshaht and Hupacasath First Nations, but also because Port Alberni is “perfectly positioned” to become a hub for the blue economy. It’s a geographically central location, and its residents are heavily impacted by the decline of the logging industry.

“Port Alberni has a disproportionate amount of residents that rely on the forestry sector,” Temple said. “A lot of the skills used in the forest industry transfer over very well for a meaningful career pathway in a restoration-based economy.”

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– Josh Temple

But Temple warns that the blue economy is growing quickly, and moving too slowly will put Port Alberni at a disadvantage.

“As the new sector unfolds, it’s unfolding rapidly,” he said. “The provincial and federal governments are investing heavily—we want to see Port Alberni be a part of that, and we want to encourage leadership to invest as early as possible.”

Baker would agree. Although Alberni Yachts is hoping to lead the way with its zero emissions model, Baker warned that this won’t be “new” for long. The yachting industry is concerned that they are losing the interest of the next generation as “polluters without a purpose,” he explained.

“The whole maritime industry is de-carbonizing,” he said. “This represents a good point in time for B.C. to enter this larger yacht market because

we have all the technical capacities and materials here. This is a good opportunity for us to get into the market and compete.”

The City of Port Alberni is well aware of the benefits of a blue economy. Port Alberni Mayor Sharie Minions joined a virtual event hosted by Ocean Startup Project back in May of this year, which discussed Canadian municipalities that are exploring and pursuing ocean opportunities, and explained that Port Alberni has seen a shift in the last 10 years away from resource extraction.

“We’re seeing more momentum built around regeneration,” she said.

Mike Fox, the city’s CAO, says the city has formed “good working relationships” with the industries working on Port Alberni’s waterfront.

“I think the city can work with all of our partners and look at any way we can collaborate with other levels of government,” he said. “We can advocate for them. As long as we continue to work collaboratively and empower these companies to make good headway, I think we’ll see them move forward in Port Alberni.”

Fox says that in addition to the partners they already have, there are “a number” of industries in the blue economy area that are “keenly” looking at Port Alberni as a hub.

“We have a deep water port and access to the coast,” he said. “We have land available and we’re working with all our partners to make sure that we’re suited that way.”

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