



The future of Fort St. James is cloudy, but Canfor says brighter days will return — though no estimated time of arrival is known.

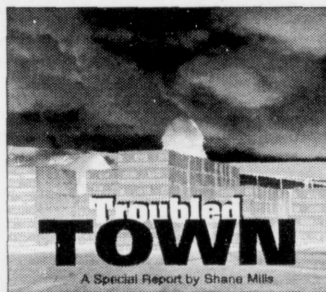
DownTime

How one town is handling taking the hardest hits offered by the forest industry

A sliver of sun peeks through the clouds this Sunday, reflecting off Stuart Lake, which is getting pummeled by winds that whip the waves. The community is gathered around Cottonwood Park for the annual Terry Fox Run, ignoring the contradictory weather and refusing to give into any kind of despair. Life has never been easy in this forestry town, hidden away in a northern pocket of the province, but the last few months have shaken the resolve of Fort St. James and simultaneously stirring the passions of a normally stoic town as the next few months promise to be even more difficult.

What is happening in the Fort is being replayed across the north, as communities that long expected forestry to comfort them find a new reality, a cold dispassionate approach to business that means the bottom-line and sustained profit margins take precedence.

However, the residents of Fort St. James are feeling a little under siege, as the problems in the forestry industry — whether it be stumpage, low lumber prices, wet weather or native disputes — has hit this town of 4,800 all at once.



And then came the worst blow — Canfor, the town's major employer, will be taking another 25 days of downtime at the mill before the end of year.

"I'll tell you how bad it is," says logger Russ Gingrich. "We have people in this community on the verge of losing their homes due to the shortage of work over the summer both in the milling and the logging sector."

New experience

Fort St. James, in the words of Mayor Jim Toygi, has been mostly recession proof in the past. A small

community, with easy access to the timber supply and provider of quality wood, the town has always attracted a hardy soul. No easy life here, just a chance to get good pay for a good day's work. "It is certainly different than it has been all these years," says Mayor Toygi. "We were probably the only town that didn't know what recession was. This is the first time we're actually taking some time off. I've never seen it this bad, and I've been here for 35 years working in the forest industry."

Canfor, as the largest employer, takes all the hits for the uncertainty that is gripping Fort St. James, though the mayor notes the two other sawmills in town — Apollo Forest Products and Stuart Lake Lumber — have also taken downtime.

Frustration is mounting, but no one blames the companies for taking the downtime. "I do respect business decisions and they do have to be made and it is no longer a private enterprise, there are a lot of shareholders out there who have to be kept happy," says Mr. Gingrich, who has operated a logging truck in town for the past 23 years. "I respect the business decisions, but I hope they could be made in a different manner, not so extreme."

And what Mr. Gingrich refers to as 'extreme' decisions seems to be at the core of an unsettled feeling that is enveloping the town. A lack of notice before downtime, a delay in heading into the bush this summer, a stoppage of timber removal because of a native blockade and, now, the latest announcement of more downtime — just before the holidays. "You don't know nothing and no one tells you nothing, that's the big thing," says logging truck owner Wayne Foster. "They come on Friday and make another announcement, that they want another five weeks of shutdown between now and Christmas. Well, that doesn't leave them a lot of working time left."

Repairing two of his three trucks on a Sunday afternoon in order to keep costs at a minimum, Mr. Foster says the town is struggling to keep its head above the stormy waters and no one is willing to throw it a life preserver. "I have no intention of leaving, but I just hope I can hang on to get through this downfall," says Mr. Foster.

Canfor sets tone

As the largest employer in town, Canfor sends signal of the whole community's health by its decisions.