

Lheidli eye June deadline

Band works at identifying possible lands, though election could put damper on talks

Lheidli T'enneh negotiators want more and they want better.

That's the requirement for band negotiators who have been busily narrowing down parcels of land they would like to see offered in their next government offer, tentatively scheduled for this June.

The timeline has been set even though B.C. Liberals, favoured to win the upcoming provincial election, have vowed to take the treaty process to referendum before negotiations would continue in a Liberal government.

"There's no guarantees from the Liberals with regard to election expectations," says Rick Krehbiel. "We don't know what will happen."

Aboriginal Affairs spokesperson Peter Smith says ministry staff continue to work on issues at the table.

"Prior to the election we will continue to do what we've been doing, during an election we will be doing very little work or none at all, and after an election our staff will proceed as directed by the government."

He could not confirm the June timeline.

The Lheidli position has always been that the responsibility for treaty making rests on the Crown, no matter what political party they

belong to. But if the Liberals refuse to negotiate, Lheidli leaders have not ruled out taking the government to court. "Litigation is always the backup plan, of course," Mr. Krehbiel says, adding the Lheidli have no such strategy planned as yet.

Local land currently on the Lheidli wish list includes federally owned Experimental Farm, near the Prince George Airport, and land parcels near the Willow and Herick Rivers, eyed for their forestry and timber potential.

Lheidli researcher Mike Bozoki would not confirm the size and location of land being requested, saying only "that's what we're trying to figure out." He says the bulk of

other issues and chapters of the agreement have already been settled.

Lheidli negotiators were not satisfied with initial federal/provincial lands offered last August that included little more than 2,900 hectares east and north of the Shelley reserve. Remaining land includes the Clesbaonechek Reserve on the Nechako River, the Solaquo Reserve lands at Chilako River and an additional 240 hectare parcel at the Experimental Farm. One hectare of cemetery lands in

Fort George Park was to remain fee simple.

At the time the Lheidli criticized the low value land, much of which was considered "swamp" land, for its inability to give 268 band members a sustainable income. The land, said to be one seventh of land offered 100 years ago, was accompanied by \$7.5 million cash offer. While a higher dollar figure is also being requested the final request will reflect the value of land on the negotiating table.

Recently re-elected Lheidli chief Barry Seymour has said the band would need 280,000 hectares of productive land, not including any additional cash, to guarantee Lheidli band members the same per capita income as nearby Prince George residents.

"The amount of land they've offered so far is insulting," says chief negotiator Bill Wilson. "I own more than that."

Another contentious area standing in the way of a second offer is a wildlife management issue that would guarantee the Lheidli hunting and fishing rights in traditional territories that extend just east of Vanderhoof to the Alberta border.

In the current offer, all hunting and fishing rights would be extinguished outside of the settlement area.

"The chapter on wildlife is a particularly difficult one," says Mr. Krehbiel.

"The offer has not moved at all since August, which suggests to me there's only one party negotiating here."



Wilson

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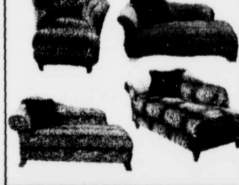
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