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UP FRONT

McLeod Lake band takes control of land granted in treaty

An agreement signed Wednesday between the McLeod Lake Indian Band and the Fraser-Fort George Regional District is meant to ensure the fair and open transfer of land to band control.

A handful of band members are set to have some 3,500 acres of Crown land transferred to their ownership under the terms of a treaty deal signed three years ago.

Although details of how the land will be transferred are still being worked out, the agreement between the district and the band is meant to smooth the process.

The two governments will share information and resources and ensure the transfer meets the requirements of both parties, said regional district chair Colin Kinsley.

All land will be Crown-owned, and within McLeod Lake traditional territory, which stretches as far south as Summit Lake.

The transfers will not affect private landowners, and the land will be subject to regional district zoning requirements, said district administrator Tom Long.

Under the treaty deal that saw the McLeod band sign on to the 100-year-old Treaty 8, the band received about \$35 million in cash and 50,000 acres of land – or the equivalent of 128 acres per member.

Individual members had the right to choose 160 acres of land “in severalty” instead. Of the 420 band members, 22 opted to do so.

The land will be owned individually, but will not hold the same fee-simple designation as other privately-owned land. The 22 individuals will remain band members.

Whether they will have to pay property tax has not yet been decided. Treaty 8 First Nations are currently in the midst of a court battle over their tax-free status.

The remaining 400 band members voted to take their land under collective ownership when the deal was signed in March 2000, said chief Harley Chingee.

“We wanted to keep it as a unit because it meant we stay together as a group,” he said, noting the band could theoretically cease to exist if all members took their land independently.

Holding the land collec-



Chief Harley Chingee, centre, and Regional District Chair Colin Kinsley sign an information-sharing agreement as McLeod Lake band member Daphne Nicolson looks on. CAM MCALPINE/FREE PRESS

tively was also an economic development move that has paid off in the three years since the deal was signed, said Chingee. The band runs the most successful First Nation-owned forestry company in the country.

School trustee wants board to examine its ‘vision’ for the district

Confusion, consternation and a certain amount of “cart-before-the-horse” thinking have been growing ever since the school district secondary school configuration report was released last July.

Calling for a temporary halt to school closures may be one way of putting the horse back in front of the cart, suggested school board trustee Lyn Hall.

“My reason for the moratorium is not based on frustration,” said Hall, who brought a last minute motion to Tuesday’s special school board meeting to consider a two year break from school closures.

“I’m saying that perhaps we need a moratorium on secondary school closures so that we as a board and as individual trustees can take a look at what we think the vision of secondary configuration should be.”

This year’s configuration report was different than previous years.

In each of the last two years, reports were prepared by a committee of stakeholders and they gave school trustees a number of options for saving money by closing elementary schools. The reports were followed by extensive public consultation.

This year, a consultant offered to do the secondary configuration report as part of his Master’s degree requirements. It did not involve stakeholders, and its recommendations directed trustees to one of only two realistic conclusions: close two junior high schools or close Duchess Park Secondary School.

Trustees categorically rejected the latter option Tuesday when they voted 5-1 against John Rustad’s motion to consider closing Duchess.

The whole process has left parents of John McInnis and Lakewood junior secondary schools wondering if the closure of their schools is inevitable, given they are the only ones on the table.

Meanwhile, trustees agreed to hold a series of meetings to discuss the district’s “vision” for secondary school education in the future. The meetings are tentatively scheduled for around the same time as meetings to talk about the John McInnis and Lakewood closures in January.

The point Hall wanted to make was that talking about “vision” while simultaneously considering school closures is a little like closing the barn door after the horse is already gone.

“I think we need to take a look at where we’re headed with grade configuration, with the geographic location of secondary schools – the entire vision of what

we as a board think secondary school configuration should look like.”

Hall’s motion for a moratorium was tabled until early January.

His fellow trustees agreed they needed more information in order to determine if not closing schools is financially feasible, and in order to give the public adequate warning.

Secretary-treasurer Bryan Mix is expected to provide the board with financial projections for the rest of the year.

The board came into the year facing a budget shortfall of about \$5.5 million. Recent funding changes have reduced that by over \$1 million.

The configuration report said closing the two junior high schools would save the district just over \$1 million. Duchess Park’s closure would save an estimated \$750,000, it said.

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