

2010 OLYMPICS

Province signs over land near Whistler to natives

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SQUAMISH -- The provincial government will sign over 122 hectares of Crown land in and around Whistler to the Squamish and Lil'wat aboriginal bands, smoothing the way for the 2010 Winter Olympics.

The deal makes the bands the largest potential land developers in the resort area, with land worth tens of millions of dollars to be zoned for residential, industrial and recreational use.

The Squamish and Lil'wat will share the revenue and development potential of the eight plots, which are scattered throughout the municipality, and will soon be purchased from the province for a token payment of a dollar.

Treaty negotiations for the bands remain unaffected by the deal, which was struck under the Legacy Lands Agreement and had been under negotiation since 2002.

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"I'm very happy, and it allows us a whole new array of opportunities," said Chief Gibby Jacob of the Squamish Nation. "We can tell our young people to continue their education and there will be more opportunities for them in the future that aren't there in our projects today."

A municipality spokesperson said one parcel alone, a 13-hectare section of the Alpine North residential area where homes can go for more than \$1-million, could see the building of about 75 detached homes with a market value of up to \$75-million.

The deal uses up 452 "bed units," the measure Whistler uses to allow development and that are capped by the province.

The government has also offered the two bands a 10-year lease for a further 60 hectares in the Callaghan Valley, to go with 40 hectares received through the Legacy Land deal. The plan is to use the land to develop a golf course and other recreational facilities near the site of the new Olympic venues in the valley.

Whistler counsellors voted in favour of transferring development rights to the Squamish and Lil'wat at a council meeting on Monday.

Ken Melamed, the mayor of the resort, said Whistler will receive from the province 122 hectares of Crown land for \$1 in a similar deal. The plan was to create a community land bank that will be used to build badly needed affordable housing for local workers.

He added that 49 hectares of it initially would be used to build the athletes village for the Games.

"It's been a long time in the making. Historical is an accurate word to use. It resolves a lot of issues that Whistler has been trying to negotiate with the province and with our first nations neighbours to the north and south," he said.

"The agreement outlines how we are going to deal with the land interests that they have secured as part of the 2010 legacy."

Mr. Melamed said that the two agreements would open the way to a boundary expansion that would see the municipality grow by 10,500 hectares, around 63 per cent of its current size of 16,600 hectares. This agreement should be signed later this year, he said.

"It's been a long road to travel. This enables Whistler to secure land for its own development and the development of the Olympic Games," he went on to say. "It provides a buffer for Whistler's own development.

"Much to our delight, we were able through this negotiation with the province to be able to provide significant opportunities for first nations in a hands-on partnership."

As well as supporting the boundary expansion and Community Land Bank, the Squamish and Lil'wat nations will also support the resort's acquisition of five day-skier parking lots, and two other sites that could be used for a waste transfer station and a park-and-ride lot at Function Junction.

Nancy Wilhelm-Morden was the only Whistler counsellor to vote against supporting the agreement between the province and first nations.

"It's not because of the involvement of first nations per se. I am uneasy with the idea of any one group getting that much residential development land," she said.

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