

Natives hang shingle

By John Bermingham
Business Reporter

After a gap of nearly 200 years, the First Nations are again open for business.

And, within five years they say, Canada could have a commercial powerhouse with land the size of B.C., cash of up to \$15 billion and a potential labor force of 500,000.

"Be prepared to do business with native people," says Calvin Helin, president of the Native Trade and Investment Association

'Commercial powerhouse'

(NITA), "because the land-claims situation is not on your side."

More than 75 native exhibitors are in Vancouver through tomorrow to sell their wares and invite joint ventures.

NEXUS '91 is the country's first native investment show. It's a low-budget affair, high on arts and crafts but low on heavy industry.

Helin claims that will change as land-

claims cases are won and cash settlements re-allocated to tribal councils.

"The native potential for doing business is about the most dynamic area of growth in the Canadian economy," he says.

B.C. Indian bands like the Musqueam, Haida and the Nisga'a are already involved in business and others are open to offers.

The Musqueam have their own shipyard, Vancouver's Celtic Shipyards, while the Nisga'a are negotiating with Orenda Forest

Products to build a \$200-million pulp mill near Terrace.

Helin wants a self-reliant native business sector, no longer dependent on government handouts.

"What we are promoting is economic integration, not assimilation."

Regional tribal councils will decide for themselves, he says. "So long as business is kept within our guidelines, they (non-native firms) are free to do business."

NITA has recently talked to Asian investors about possible mining and forestry ventures, Helin discloses.

The incentives are attractive — a young workforce making up one-in-four new workers in western Canada, 61-per-cent tax write-offs on investments in native communities and access to natural resources.

In return, the natives want a piece of the action. That means profit-sharing and a commitment to locate in native communities as well as to employ and train native workers.

Don Hannah, regional director of the federal aboriginal business development program, claims to have a 75-per-cent success rate with new native firms in B.C., Alberta and the Yukon.

"They need some capital and more management training and business planning skills," says Hannah.

He feels natives will become increasingly involved in forestry, fishing and mining, as well as tourism and small business.

But Hannah feels there will be failures due to the hazards that await any start-up.

"I do not think there will be a haste to run into large joint ventures," he says. "They are cautious business people."

Under the Canadian aboriginal development strategy, Ottawa is spending \$800 million developing small businesses, community economies and training until 1994.

After that, decision-making and funding will begin to move out to the tribal councils.

"Native people are going to take more charge of their own economy and they are spending more and more money on their own development," says Hannah.

The non-native business world is taking note.

In NEXUS '91, speakers from the business community are talking about investment opportunities in a series of seminars.

Industry, Science and Technology Canada has put up half the \$150,000 cost of the show.

"If you approach native people on an equal level, they will be more than pleased to do business with you," Helin says.



Staff photo by Bruce Stotesbury

Prepare to do business with natives, says Calvin Helin, president of native trade and investment group.