

BUSINESS

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Thunderbird RV Park and Resort: finding gold in an existing asset

Thirty-seven years ago, Wei Wai Kum leaders decided to turn a piece of Tye Spit that forms part of its largest reserve into a public campground.

Thanks largely to Sandra Malone, a Wei Wai Kum member who has managed it since 1992, the Thunderbird RV Park has been cultivated into a friendly, service-oriented campsite for RVs and tenters. Each year it hosts a highly successful annual fishing derby and barbecue, and about 80 per cent of its clientele returns year after year.

“That campground has always done well economically,” says Chief Councillor Bob Pollard, who’s lived on this reserve with about half the Nation’s approximately 800 members all his life.

In 2007, when Coast Funds came into being, Wei Wai Kum Nation quickly developed conservation initiatives. Leaders like Chief Pollard began asking: How best should it invest funds into economic development projects – launch a new business, or build on



Thunderbird RV Park and Resort has been a mainstay on Wei Wai Kum-owned land on Tye Spit. Photo courtesy Thunderbird RV Park and Resort

one of the Nation’s existing ones? This very entrepreneurial Nation has launched several successful ventures since opening Thunderbird in 1980—including a marina, marine fuel service, and a shopping centre.

Pollard was perceiving signals that maybe Thunderbird’s true potential hadn’t yet been tapped, and he wasn’t alone. Malone was watching client demographics shift over time.

“We’re seeing fewer families, and more people who are downsizing – getting rid of their homes and RVing full-time,

and taking advantage of a low Canadian dollar,” says Malone. More and more

guests are coming from overseas (Europe, primarily), seeking ecotour-

ism activities, like whale-watching and bear viewing, and introductions to indigenous cultures – and they are willing to stay for weeks. Some park visitors are local to Campbell River and work from home, and feel the need to “get away” for the summer – but not too far. Others

are just working in the area temporarily, or are vacationing from elsewhere on Vancouver Island and choosing to avoid ferry fees. It all adds up to unceasing demand for the park’s 53 serviced RV sites, with many sites booked a year in advance and up to 30 RVs a day being

turned away during the high season.

At the same time, the park’s tenting area was under-used, sometimes generating as little as \$1,500 a year, and there were more and more unsolicited inquiries about whether Thunderbird had cottages.

“The question be-
Continued on A35

MANAGING YOUR MONEY

Taking a vacation is good for your health

Americans may have a reputation for being a nation of workaholics but they’re not alone. Last year, Canadians left an average of three unused vacation days on the table, according to Expedia¹. That represents nearly 31 million unused vacation days in 2016 alone.

While leaving a few left over vacation days may not seem like a big deal, research shows that not taking holidays can be bad for your health. One study, by the Journal of the American Medical Association, found that men who take frequent annual vacations were 32 percent less likely to die from heart disease as people who didn’t take any vacation².

In another study, it was discovered that women who took vacation once every six years or less were about eight times more likely to get coronary heart disease or have a heart attack than women who took at least two vacations a year³. A lack of vacations can also increase stress, depression and anxiety, too.

Unfortunately, many people would rather stay at work, in part because they’re too busy to leave or they think that taking time off could hurt their jobs, though there’s little proof that vacations kill careers.

So what can you do to ensure you get away?

Plan early Schedule your holidays for the coming six to 12 months and immediately block those days in your calendar – then stick to it. Don’t expect to ever find the perfect

time to get away, just plan your days well in advance so that you have enough time to prepare for your time out of office.

Don’t be afraid to delegate Many people don’t want to burden their colleagues with extra work while they’re away. They may even fear losing out on a raise or a promotion if they let someone else do their job. However, a research study by the U.S. Travel Association showed that people who took fewer than 10 of their vacation days per year had a 34.6% likelihood of receiving a raise or bonus in a three-year period of time. Comparatively, people who took more than 10 of their vacation days had a 65.4% chance of receiving a raise or bonus.

Pay yourself first If you’re self-employed or receive holiday pay on every cheque instead of paid days off, it can be difficult to put that money aside to fund your time off. Consider setting up an automatic transfer from your chequeing to your savings account so that when holiday time comes, you don’t take a financial hit.

In the end, the key is to make your vacation time a priority. It will pay off when you return to work refreshed and refocused.

¹<http://press.expedia.ca/node/1774>

²<http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/377969>

³https://www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org/_WMS/publications/wmj/pdf/104/6/20.pdf



TIPS FROM TAP

Employees have the right to be paid a minimum wage. Applicable legislation exists in Canada as part of employment standards legislation. The rate is the lowest amount per hour employers can pay employees covered by the statutes.

By late 2017 the average minimum wage in Canada will be about \$11.43 per hour. That compares to \$9.25 in 2010, an increase of over 23%.

As of early 2017 Nunavut has the highest minimum rate at \$13.00/hr. Newfoundland and Labrador is the lowest with \$10.50/hr. Under Canada’s Constitution, responsibility for enacting and enforcing labour laws – including minimum wage – rests individually with the ten provinces and three territories. They’ve been granted this power by federal legislation.

Every year each province and territory reviews its existing rate. The political party in charge decides on whether to provide an increase or not. Factors such as inflation, unemployment and developments in other jurisdictions are taken into account.

TO BE Continued...

1281 Cedar Street, Campbell River
Phone: 250-914-5828
Email: info@tapbookkeeping.ca
WWW.tapbookkeeping.ca



Sonia Edwards MBA
Division Director

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RV Park: Cottages target additional market

Continued from A33

came: Can Thunderbird do more for us?" says Chief Pollard.

Inspired by another Indigenous community that was profitably flying groups of trout-fishers into a remote location, Pollard started generating ideas with Wei Wai Kum Council members and band staff, Malone, and Coast Funds.

"Everyone was involved," he remembers. "We recognized that you have to have something more than a campground. It was amazing, all the ideas that came out to attract people. And sure, some went in the wastebasket!"

Cottages looked like a promising way to reach an additional market. Rachel Wiley, who was working for the Nation as a cultural tourism coordinator at the time, developed a comprehensive plan with detailed cash projections, and communicated it persuasively in a presentation to Chief and Council.

"She was instrumental," affirmed

Malone, to Pollard's enthusiastic agreement.

Armed with Wiley's calculations, Wei Wai Kum members debated tough questions in a series of planning meetings held in collaboration with Coast Funds. Ultimately, Wei Wai Kum chose a cross between beach cottage and nice hotel, made two of the cottages two-storey, and ensured that all of the cottages (and onsite showers for RV guests) were reasonably accessible on the ground floor.

"That really didn't make much difference in terms of cost," notes Chief Pollard.

Where to put the cottages was another question. No one was keen to move the business's most loyal RV customers, with their coveted seaside views, to make way for cottages. But it became clear that optimizing views for those higher-end services was in the Nation's best interest. The Nation opted to rededicate six of those seaside sites for

cottages, and apply for a second phase of Coast Funds' investment towards construction of 18 additional fully-serviced RV sites.

Further analysis also revealed that, rather than five cottages, it made more sense to construct four cottages and additional space for on-site laundry, storage, and guest showers. This would support cottage servicing, expand services for guests, and generate additional revenue.

Once funding from Coast Funds was approved, cottage construction began in fall 2015. Additional RV site construction followed in fall 2016.

Today, the completed cottages offer private, front-row views of the estuary and all of its waterborne traffic – like seabirds, swans, kayakers, seaplanes, and occasionally, whales. But backwoods they aren't.

Airy with sea-and-sky tones but warmed by touches of marine decor and floorings suggestive of rustic hardwood

and, these cottages say "comfortable". They include well-designed kitchens, quality appliances and classy finishings, generous pillows

and quality linens, electric fireplaces, jet tubs, and hot tubs on shaded private porches.

Malone says the cottages are about

95 per cent booked in the high season, about 50 to 60 per cent booked during their first (only) shoulder season, and completely taken up

over Christmas.

"We were targeting July and August, but it turns out people are willing to rent them year-round," Pollard says.

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