

Treaty value pegged at \$70 million

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The Tsawwassen treaty is officially valued at \$70.1 million, leaving some local politicians to say it has been purposely undervalued.

The federal and provincial governments confirmed that figure with the Optimist this week, although earlier media reports pegged the yet-to-be-ratified deal at \$120 million.

"That's what our minister has talked about and that's what we've talked about," Deborah Bowman, communications director with the provincial Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Ministry, said of the \$70.1 million figure.

Federal chief negotiator Tom Koepke said the figure "reflects the value of the 434 hectares (1,072) of provincial Crown land transferred to the band and the one-time and ongoing payments taken to a net present value."

Delta-Richmond East MP John Cummins believes the negotiators valued the land as agricultural, which may account for the lower value.

Bowman confirmed the land was valued at agricultural levels even though just about half of it - 207 hectares (511 acres) - will be automatically removed from the Agricultural Land Reserve.

"That's deceitful and dishonest," Cummins said.

Delta North NDP MLA Guy Gentner wasn't any kinder.

"The Liberals have not done a true analysis of what it's worth and what it costs," said Gentner, who added the NDP caucus met about the treaty last week.

While he didn't elaborate on what was discussed, Gentner was critical of the government for low-balling the value of the treaty.

"You think that would have been done. Before the deal is signed, you better understand what it's worth," Gentner said.

The removal of almost half the transferred land from the ALR is the key issue financially as it allows the Tsawwassen First Nation to use the land industrially, commercially or residentially.

Based on those possibilities, the Delta Optimist estimates the treaty to be worth somewhere between \$300 million and \$600 million.

That estimate doesn't include the land already in possession of the band -290 hectares (716 acres), ongoing cash payments, nor resource sections of the agreement such as fishing and forestry.

It's an estimate of cash payments in the first year, the value of the remaining agricultural land and the value of the land removed from the reserve.

According to the federal government, the Tsawwassen First Nation has 270 registered band members. The band reports 163 members are residents on the reserve.

At its highest value, that means the treaty could be worth as much \$2.2 million for each band member, although individuals will not actually receive that. At the lower end, it's \$1.1 million a person.

"I asked (federal Indian Affairs) Minister (Jim) Prentice on what he based the value of the treaty, on industrial or agricultural land, and he didn't know. I think the public deserves an apology. This whole thing should be examined more carefully. This is one treaty with 163 residents. What happens when this is repeated again and again?" Cummins asked.

Koepke and Bowman say they don't know where the earlier \$120 million figure came from.

"That's a number I can't speak to and I don't know who brought that number forward. I think it's basically people trying to do math based on what they think the value of the land is. That's not the provincial government's position on the cost. It's \$70.1 million," Bowman said.

The Optimist was unable to reach Delta South MLA Val Roddick by press deadline yesterday. Roddick was one of the witnesses to the treaty during the initialing ceremony Dec. 8.

TFN Chief Kim Baird, off on maternity leave, said shortly after the ceremony the treaty was good deal for band members.

The treaty has not yet been finalized. TFN members must ratify it first. Baird said she hoped that would happen by the summer. The next step is ratification by the federal and provincial governments.