

Ucluelet goes -- and grows -- with the flow

After taking a back seat to Tofino for decades, 'ugly stepsister' has no worries about water

Darah Hansen, CanWest News Service

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UCLUELET -- This is a tale, not of two cities, but of two small towns, both nestled away in a magical rainforest on the edge of the Pacific.

To the north, there is lovely Tofino -- a gentle community of hippies and surfers -- renowned worldwide for its natural beauty and seaside charm.

Forty kilometres to the south lies Ucluelet, a former fishing and logging town that was once unkindly considered the ugly stepsister to its Cinderella-like neighbour.

How times have changed. These days Ucluelet's role is more like benevolent saviour, and Tofino the poor country cousin.

Water -- or the lack of it -- has made all the difference in this story.

Ucluelet has it in abundance. Tofino, meanwhile, has all but none.

Ucluelet Mayor Dianne St. Jacques is reluctant to say why exactly the situation is as it is, at least when talking about Tofino's current problems.

"They are our neighbours and we want to help them," she said.

Of Ucluelet's water supply, however, St. Jacques will happily talk.

"Ucluelet has plenty of water," she said.

Eight years ago, the council of the day sold off a prime piece of municipally owned waterfront real estate in order to come up with its share of an \$8-million infrastructure improvement project, partnered with the federal and provincial government.

The project saw the town tap into Lost Shoe Creek, an aquifer at the highway junction between Tofino and Ucluelet.

While Tofino has, for years, had to issue seasonal water restrictions to residents and businesses in order to try and keep up with the demands on its aging system, Ucluelet has had no such problems now for nearly a decade.

"We don't need to," said St. Jacques. "We've done our infrastructure changes."

This year, when Tofino's water crisis hit an all-time high, forcing the town to consider shutting down its multi-million-dollar tourist trade on the eve of the Labour Day long weekend, Ucluelet is happily bustling, with four new oceanfront resorts under construction, as well as a high-end Jack Nicklaus "signature" golf course.

Water is not an issue.

"We have plenty of capacity for our current development," St. Jacques said. "It's all going along at a nice pace for us."

Ucluelet, admittedly, has learned from Tofino's own growing pains.

Once a tiny fishing village, Tofino landed on the world's tourist radar following the environmental battles over Clayoquot Sound in 1993.

Today, the town plays host to as many as 15,000 tourists a day in the peak summer season, and is home to dozens of resorts, hotels and campgrounds.

At the same time, Tofino's infrastructure has failed to keep pace with demand. The town's water system, drawing water from Meares Island, is now 25 years old.

And past attempts by various councils to upgrade the system -- including tapping into nearby Kennedy Lake -- have been shot down by the town's 1,800 permanent residents, many of whom feel they shouldn't have to pay for a problem created by the tourism-based development.

"The town has not gone deeply enough into the nature of [the problem] in order to find out what measures need to be taken," said resident Shirley Langer.

"A place like this, at the end of the road, with up to 15,000 people invited a day. It's absurd," she said. "

Currently, construction is in place to hook the town up to Ginnard Creek for use as an alternate water system. But that project -- which includes chlorination and filtration of the water -- is still two years away from completion. And, if this summer is any indication, Tofino is in dire need of a solution now.