

Sacred Trade: Caves for Casinos

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Clippings - Andrew MacLeod - According to a November 21 agreement in principle between the Saanich Nation and Songhees band councils, the province of British Columbia, the City of Langford and Bear Mountain Corporation, agreed the first nations will "hold [a] healing ceremony at Sacred Cave, after which development will proceed."

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Sacred Cave Lost, Casino Gained

Andrew MacLeod

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First Nations on southern Vancouver Island will lose a sacred cave and gain a casino if an agreement in principle goes ahead.

In exchange the Sencoten Alliance, which represents four First Nations including the Tsartlip, will gain among other things \$2 million from the province, \$6 million from the developer, the right to gather firewood on the developer's property and "access to jobs in Bear Mountain casino." The agreement in principle later states, "A 'First Nations Casino' will be established as a joint venture between all of the Saanich tribes, the municipal govt, Bear Mtn., and the BC Lottery Corp.."

For several months the cave, located on Skirt Mountain outside Victoria, has been the subject of a disagreement between the Bear Mountain Corporation and local First Nations who say it is sacred. Two weeks ago a number of people gathered to block further destruction of the cave, which had reportedly had its roof blown off and been filled with tires.

Asked about the casino plan, Songhees chief Robert Sam says, "That's part of it, yeah, but there's a whole lot more." The cave will be lost, he says. "That's sort of a trade off." He declined to say more, explaining that he isn't the media liaison on the agreement.

A call to the Tsartlip Band Council was not immediately returned.

"The main thing for me is it follows a pattern that's been pretty routine in a lot of these matters," says Taiaiake Alfred, the head of the indigenous governance program at the University of Victoria. Aboriginals will take action on something like the cave, he says, "Then the band councillors step in and use it as some sort of leverage to gain compensation. The band councillors take it as an opportunity to make some money, and I think that's what happened here."

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The band councils are a product of federal legislation, he adds, and are accountable to the Canadian government. "There's no real accountability of the band council leaders to their own people."

The agreement in principle that accepts money and a casino in exchange for the destruction of a sacred site makes earlier statements from band councillors about how important the site is look like hypocrisy, he says.

The agreement in principle has not yet been presented to the first nations communities involved. A November 28 meeting was cancelled because of snow. A meeting on the Tsartlip reserve is scheduled for December 5.

Following are details of the agreement in principle:

The SENCOTEN Alliance, represented by Eric Pelkey, agreed to the following:

1. receives \$2 million from the provincial govt (commitment to ensure water and sewer on reserve as well) and \$6 million from Bear Mtn Corp for infrastructure on Tsartlip FN lands;
2. right to gather firewood on Bear Mountain property;
3. members access to jobs in Bear Mountain casino;
4. the creation of a Sacred site display in Bear Mountain Village and public info/trail to Guardian Rocks site;
5. to identify other sacred sites; and,
6. hold healing ceremony at Sacred Cave, after which development will proceed.

The SONGHEES FN, represented by Robert Sam, agreed to the following:

1. will identify sacred sites and hold ceremonies before they are developed;
2. receive transfer of certain highway, provincial and Capital Comm. lands from province; and,
3. province to pay \$20,000 legal fees.

BEAR MOUNTAIN CORPORATION agreed to the following:

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1. receives additional land (Capital Comm. Lot 28, "Guardian Rocks") from province; and,
2. province to pay \$450,000 for legal fees and archaeology.

Other provisions agreed to jointly by ALL PARTIES include:

1. a "First Nations Casino" will be established as a joint venture between all of the Saanich tribes, the municipal govt, Bear Mtn., and the BC Lottery Corp.
2. the interchange project on Spencer Rd. will receive \$1 million from the province on behalf of the Songhees FN.
3. \$30,000 to FNs and \$300,000 to Langford from province to produce an info brochure on archaeological assessments.
4. one-time payment of \$90,000 to FNs, \$10,000 each to Tsartlip & Songhees FNs, and \$90,000 to Langford from province.

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