

'It's all about Quality of Life'

By Scott Randolph with files from Robert Dufour

'Outstanding Quality of Life'. If you were to sum it all up, that is what Powell River is all about. Yes it may sound pretentious, and yes there are many communities that make this claim, but there are very few that can deliver the way Powell River can.

Located approximately 135 kilometres north of Vancouver on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast, the Powell River region is set to grow at an exponential rate over the next few years. Already real estate trends are showing that retirees and young families from large urban centres are choosing the region as a place to relocate to. It is a superior quality of life that is the priority for these two demographics. In interviews conducted with people who have settled in the Powell River region in the last three years, the major factors influencing their decision included:

- The availability of modern health services and facilities.
- The wide range and availability of affordable housing and property.
- The overall safety (low crime rate) and cleanliness of the region.
- The ready access to nature and superb outdoor recreational amenities.
- The wide range of shopping, restaurants and business services.
- The rich arts and cultural community. (A Cultural Capital of Canada 2004)

Other attributes of the region that were mentioned included excellent schools, the availability of post secondary education, High Speed Internet services and the ability to lead an active and involved life in the community.

The Powell River region is an interesting mix of urban and rural. A majority of the population resides within the Municipality of Powell River. Outside of the Municipality are the small communities of Lund, Saltery Bay, and Sliammon. The region also includes the residents of Texada and Savary Islands.

Although the beautiful natural setting is the region's most startling feature, it does offer modern amenities like a new full service hospital; 2 post secondary education institutions in Camber College and Malaspina University/College; a wide range of retail stores and services; an above par recreational complex; an airport that offers multiple flights and destinations; and a solid telecommunications infrastructure, including High Speed Internet service.

The region's major employer is NorskeCanada Inc., which operates a paper manufacturing facility within the municipality that produces over 450,000 tonnes of newsprint and lightweight papers per year. It currently employs around 700 people. Although the region is diversifying its economy, forestry is still the largest contributing sector with logging, sawmill and value added wood manufacturing. This industry helps to contribute to a large skilled workforce trained in a wide variety of disciplines. Other

industries, which contribute to the size of the skilled workforce, include construction, limestone quarrying, material transportation and commercial fishing and processing.

It is this mixture of urban and rural attributes that contribute to an 'Outstanding Quality of Life'.

Transportation

The Powell River region is serviced by a number of solid transportation links.

Flying out of Powell River you can reach Vancouver International Airport in 25 minutes. Short flights are also available to Abbotsford and Comox on Vancouver Island. All of these airports give travellers access to destinations anywhere in North America and the World. Local business owner Dave Formosa, who has a number of holdings in and outside of the community, is a big fan of Powell River's air services. "I rarely have any problems travelling outside of the region. In fact, I've had instances where I've been able to fly out in the morning, grab a connection to Chicago for a business meeting, and then be back to Powell River in time for dinner with my family."

The Powell River region is also connected to Vancouver Island and Vancouver through BC Ferries. The hour long ferry route to Comox and Courtenay on Vancouver Island runs 4 times a day and is a jumping off point to anywhere on the Island (i.e. Victoria, Nanaimo, etc...). Although a little longer of a trip, the second ferry route down the Sunshine Coast to Vancouver has been described by many as one of the most beautiful journeys in the Province. Leaving the Powell River region from Saltery Bay, it takes just under an hour to reach Earl's Cove at the top of the Lower Sunshine Coast. After a scenic hour long drive south through some of the best resort country in BC, travellers reach Gibson's Landing, where they board a 40 minute ferry ride to Horseshoe Bay in West Vancouver.

Since 1912, NorskeCanada's Powell River Paper Mill (Formerly Pacifica Papers) has been producing newsprint and high quality lightweight papers for customers all over the world. The operation is probably the best example of how well the region's marine barge system works. The third largest groundwood paper manufacturer in North America, NorskeCanada is able to deliver approximately 459,000 tonnes of paper a year to destinations in North America, Latin America and Asia. Serviced by two large barge transportation companies, a multitude of other products are shipped in and out of the region daily on a very cost efficient basis. Even greater efficiencies will be reached shortly, as the Powell River Regional Economic Development Society's efforts to develop new export opportunities for the region's small to medium sized manufacturers will help to drive down costs by increasing the volume of goods being shipped.

Working in Partnership

Over the past decade or more, the lack of resolution of Treaties with First Nations has inhibited new investment in rural British Columbia. The uncertainty created by the treaty making process is no longer an issue in the Powell River Region.

The region is the traditional territory of the Sliammon Nation, and together with the Municipality of Powell River, the two communities have taken great strides to work together closely. Not only has the Sliammon Nation just reached an Agreement in Principle with the Provincial and Federal Governments, and is steps away from a final Treaty, but it has also entered into a landmark agreement with the Municipality. In May 2003 Sliammon Chief Councillor L. Maynard Harry and Powell River Mayor Stewart Alsgard, signed a Community Accord, the only one of its kind in British Columbia. The agreement puts in writing the mutual respect and recognition that exists between the two governments, and their willingness to work together for the betterment of the whole region. As Chief Harry describes it, "It is in Sliammon's best interests to facilitate opportunities, and to enable economic successes."

In a further demonstration of partnership, the economic development arms of the two communities have signed off on a new agreement as well. In January 2004, the Sliammon Development Corporation and Powell River Regional Economic Development Society entered into a Memorandum of Understanding to work in greater cooperation. The two organizations have committed to partnering on a number of economic development projects are planning more for the future.

Investment Opportunity

Traditionally, the Powell River region's economic fate has been tied to the resource based industries of Forestry and Fishing. In fact the community was first brought to life with the founding of a newsprint mill in the early 1900's. Over the years the region has been working to lessen its dependency upon a single industry by concentrating on developing other attributes of the local economy. The Powell River Regional Economic Development Society has identified a range of growth opportunities in the region. Among the sectors targeted are:

- Value Added Forestry
- Shellfish Aquaculture
- Waterfront Development
- Arts, Culture and Education
- Tourism

To date, good progress has been made in each of these sectors and with other development projects looming in the future...the time to invest is now. The following sections are a synopsis of future developments and the success experienced so far.

Value Added Forestry

Even though the intent is to lessen the dependence on traditional resource extraction, it doesn't mean the region is turning its back on the Forest Industry. Today's opportunities

in the sector are tied to adding value to raw materials. Don Allan, Manager of the Powell River Regional Economic Development Commission, considers value-added forestry among the top three opportunities in the region. “Value Added wood manufacturing has flourished in the region. We have a number of smaller companies creating innovative products and experiencing success in the global marketplace. It’s a sector we are doing our best to support and nurture.”

What is value-added forestry? It is building and operating a state-of-the-art veneer plant. It is exporting kit-form log homes; building and operating a primary breakdown mill; it is identifying and selling to a high-value niche market such as fine furniture, flooring or musical instruments.

At Toquenatch Creek Kayaks, craftsman Jürgen Koppen devotes hundreds of hours to a single boat, working by hand at every stage to produce an amazing product that has been featured on magazine covers and at kayak shows all over North America. Custom ordered by his clients, his kayaks sell for upwards of \$14,000 US.

Even though his markets are generally outside of the region, Jürgen says that there are a number of positive aspects to running his business in the Powell River region. “You’re always dealing with people at a very personal level here, even with some of the larger businesses. The network you develop with suppliers and even competitors is wonderful!”

Another example of making it in value-added forestry is Country Woodworkers. Rick Hopper’s company employs eight full-time workers to produce high quality and unique country-style furniture. He started the business in the mid-1990s, concentrating on cabinets and kitchens. His first employee came along in 1995; the shop space doubled two years later, and by 1997 there was a 5700 square foot plant on his own property.

Today, Country Woodworkers has dealers in Calgary, Vancouver, Whistler and Powell River. The company is also a supplier to the new “Costco Home” concept store in Kirkland, Washington. Hopper knows that since Costco is the second largest retailer in the world after Wal-Mart, the future could mean more expansion. He already expects to double his workforce within the next 18 – 24 months. The only limits on the growth of his business that he anticipates are the ones he chooses to place himself.

Shellfish Aquaculture

Powell River has incredible marine assets, including cold, clear waters that support high quality shellfish and other aquaculture products. According to Mark Biagi of Vision Marine Consulting, aquaculture offers one of the best economic opportunities in the region.

Presently, the local aquaculture industry consists mainly of oyster farms, but expertise and technology are being developed for new products such as abalone. Seed stock for an abalone farm is already available, and one location has been approved for licensing. “Abalone aquaculture could be a goldmine for the Powell River economy,” says Biagi. “It is a very high-value shellfish with a virtually inexhaustible market.” Other products being considered for development include sea urchins, seaweed and sea cucumbers.

It has been identified that there are markets for shellfish aquaculture products all over North America, Europe and Asia. To help access those markets and grow the local

industry, the Powell River Regional Economic Development Commission has partnered with the Vancouver Island Economic Development Association on a *New Marine Frontier Project*. “The project basically consists of developing new marketing collateral that outlines the investment potential in the shellfish industry,” says PRREDS Economic Development Manager Don Allan. “Our other objectives include building an industry database of seafood companies, contacts and investment potential for Vancouver Island and Coastal communities, and to contact 150 target companies regarding expansion into BC.” Allan says that within 5 years the project is expected to grow the Vancouver Island and Coastal industry from \$20 million to \$70 million per annum (Powell River: \$14 million), and create 1000 new jobs (Powell River: 200).

Waterfront Development

Powell River’s Waterfront has been identified as the number one economic development priority in the community. As a result, the Waterfront Development Corporation was formed as a for-profit corporation with the Corporation of the District of Powell River as its sole shareholder.

The role of the Waterfront Development Corporation includes marketing and promoting the available opportunities, helping to guide development, including both physical and business development, and managing activity on the waterfront.

Al Baronas, the Projects Manager for WDC, has much experience creating dynamic, successful waterfront developments, including the international award winning “Forks” development in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The key to his approach to Waterfront Development is *the signature project*. “This is a project that needs to be both catalytic — it will spur on other projects — and emblematic: it sets the stage for quality and for an identifiable, special look. We believe there are a couple of projects under way that may qualify as our signature projects.”

The signature project Baronas is referring to will be part of the redevelopment of the community’s South Harbour. Already plans are in place to expand the harbour to create more docking slips for vessels and an acre of land has been established to allow for the development of public space. The project is expected to increase traffic by drawing a larger percentage of the 10,000 odd recreational vessels that travel along the BC Coast on a yearly basis. The community will also be working to tap into the ever-growing Pocket Cruise market.

Another project of importance on Powell River’s waterfront is the creation of a Marine Business Park on property adjoining the NorskeCanada paper mill site. The creation of the MBP will provide opportunity for the development of light industrial and manufacturing facilities. Being located on the waterfront will give those businesses the advantage of being directly plugged into the marine barge transportation system and allow for greater ease in shipping products to market.

Arts, Culture and Education

Powell River has received the distinct honour of being named a “Cultural Capital of Canada” for 2004 by the Federal Government. The honour was the result of months of hard work by the many volunteers from the region’s vibrant Arts community working in conjunction with the Municipality and Economic Development Society. Unlike most communities, Powell River has placed a large importance on the further development of the Arts, Culture and Education sector. In fact, in 2003 the Powell River Regional Economic Development Society commissioned the creation of a ‘Cultural Master Plan’.

Researched and written by Lamont Management Inc, the Cultural Plan describes Powell River as...

“...a remarkably lively arts and culture town. This community/region of 20,000 has five performance venues and 19 producing and presenting organizations offering dance, theatre and music in virtually all its forms. Major events are staged every month from February through September; some are international in scope and reputation. Six galleries, nine cultural and heritage associations and one ceramic manufacturer complete the inventory. In addition, Powell River is home to the Powell River Academy of Music, where more than two-dozen teachers work with upwards of 500 instrumental and vocal students.”

Action on the Cultural Master Plan is already under way. One example is the Symphony Orchestra Academy of the Pacific, or ‘SOAP’. This is a school unique to Powell River that will train talented orchestral musicians, both amateur and professional. The faculty for the academy have been recruited from some of the world’s most renowned Orchestras, and students are registering for the inaugural session in June 2004.

Being held in conjunction with SOAP is the Victoria Symphony in Residency program. Through a lot of hard work, it was announced in 2003 that the Victoria Symphony (Victoria, BC) had chosen Powell River as its new summer home. The Symphony will hold concerts in the community through out its stay and is expected to draw music lovers from all over the province.

Powell River has been recognized on a number of different International fronts. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the International Choral Festival “Kathaumixw”. This event draws 35 choirs and thousands of people from around the world, and being that it is an anniversary year the Festival is expected to bigger and better than ever.

Other projects being worked upon in the Arts, Culture and Education sector include:

- The development of an Opera Academy of the Pacific
- A Lutherie School to provide instruction and practice for instrument makers at all skill levels.
- The creation of a Jazz Festival.

- The expansion of School District 47's International Student Program, which already hosts 60 students a year.

Each of these ideas offers one more economic driver for the Powell River region.

Tourism

Powell River has implemented a strategy that improves opportunities for both visitors and companies in the industry. Creating Tourism Powell River was a key to this as it formalized and expanded efforts by creating Powell River's own destination marketing organization. This also meant "having a detailed marketing plan in place for the whole community," explains Andrew Pinch, General Manager of Tourism Powell River.

The success of presenting the Powell River region in this way has become more evident over the past 2 – 3 years. This comes about as efforts became more focussed, and with the increased professionalism of the office. Membership growth of 40% has meant an improved ability to coordinate activities and to give Powell River a voice into larger tourism organizations.

Asked what help can a new business setting up in the region expect, Andrew Pinch is clear that the mandate of Tourism Powell River includes providing assistance with business planning and research, establishing contacts, providing support materials, and help with promotion.

The Powell River region offers a wide range of tourism-based assets. It boasts some of the finest outdoor recreational activities in BC, a plethora of arts and cultural events, festivals, an annual street party that draws thousands downtown, parades and more. Yet, there is capacity for expansion. Among the possibilities are inbound travel planners, destination resorts, professional guiding, and almost anything to do with freshwater activities from canoeing to hiking, and fishing for some of the finest trout in the country.

The region offers unlimited outdoor activities including "soft" adventures such as nature hikes, photography and birding. Closer to town, Powell River's Townsite is a designated National Historic Site with a very active Heritage Society involved in maintaining and promoting the area.

Of course, outdoors activities "on the edge" are also plentiful. The region is known as the diving capital of Canada, rock-climbing sites exist for all skill levels, and there are more lakes and rivers than even most residents can imagine.

Another exceptional resource is the Sliammon First Nation with its rich history, art and culture. As the Sliammon people work to augment their own economic opportunities, they contribute more and more to the region's rich cultural advantages. One example is the series of totem poles being created for installation along Powell River's new seawalk.

Finding out more...

To find out more about investment opportunities in the Powell River region, contact the Powell River Regional Economic Development Commission at (604) 485-0325 or toll free at 1-866-994-9119. You can also visit PRREDS on-line at www.preds.com.