

Nits'il'in July 2020 Update

By Russell Myers Ross



In this newsletter, I want to share (A) my decision to not run as a candidate in this election and (B) explain updates on most of the work I am a part of.

(A) Stepping away from Leadership

The September 9 election is coming up quickly. I made this decision to remove myself from candidacy after a lot of internal deliberation. I had heard some misguided rumours but I wanted to share why I am choosing not to continue as Nits'il'in. My reasons include:

- the need to spend more time with my daughters
- re-energize my health and spirit
- grieve family losses
- realign my efforts to focus on what I feel passionate about.

These are the core reasons for taking a break from leadership. It pains me when I realize that I do not have the same energy I did when I started; I desperately want to rekindle that energy. I have suppressed a lot to keep things going and I hope everyone understands that I need time to recover and reflect on how I can be most effective for my family, community, and nation when the time is right.

I have been very dedicated in working for Yunesit'in. I worked full-time hours for the community for a modest \$33,000 yearly honoraria. Consider the level of responsibility for overseeing revenue between 1-3 million dollars within Yunesit'in Government, \$700,000 on average from Yunesit'in Development Enterprise, \$200,000 plus from Dasiqox Nexwagwezan and over \$2 million from Elhdaqox Developments, our small, modest team has done a lot to manage several projects and programs. The importance of good governance, at least for our

team, is to always have a finger on the pulse because we are a small community with limited capacity and we do not have all the governing technical capacity, strategies, plans, laws and policies to act as a guide – it has been more about the leadership we brought to the table. Between Yunesit'in Government and the Tsilhqot'in National Government, we are running organizations that engage with municipal, provincial, federal levels of government, increasingly international, and increasing participation in economic sectors – and on top of that, planning towards rebuilding the Nation through articulating and enlivening our own Nenqayni laws and processes. It is a daunting responsibility, but anyone who intends to become an elected Chief needs to understand the history of all these engagements or else there is a tendency of being led by others.

I will be parting ways unsure on how everyone thinks of me. Whether you like me, begrudgingly hate me, or learned to trust and respect me, I feel like I have put a lot of care and good energy into making Yunesit'in a better place. Much of my motivation early on came from the birth of my daughter Nalina, who was born three days prior to being elected. I have served two terms and 8 years as Nits'il'in/Chief of Yunesit'in and Nalina is a living reminder of the time that has passed. Just consider, developing our Daycare, Gex yaz Qungh, was motivated by Nalina and children her age, to essentially have a space for early childhood education for younger parents who might consider working. It took a few detours, 6 years later, before completing the daycare facility, but the vision was there and we completed it. When I look around at the visible infrastructure, the Gym, Teacherage, Daycare, Greenhouses, Guest House, Mill and Houses, I am often reminded that most of these projects took 3-5 years from original concept to the design, plan, finance, construction and operations. Moreover, they represent our simple approach that we want to express in building the community: we can do it ourselves. Our 'forest-to-frame' concept where we can gather wood from the land, mill it and make buildings from the timber to produce houses is now a reality. Our construction team started with one project and we have managed to maintain our growth in financing construction so that our carpenters can stay close to home and be fully invested in the community. I think we have set the direction and hoping the momentum can be sustained on building the community further.

I am in the same boat as all Yunesit'in with the uncertainty on who will comprise the next Council to accompany Ralph and Gabe. For me, I am hopeful the new Council sees the vision and value in what was started and have a willingness to continue most of the plans that were established. As I am preparing to transition, I am reminded every day that I have garnered a lot of knowledge over the years and I am trying to figure out how I can hand off projects, experiences, and insight. In some cases, I am organizing my work and developing project charters so that there is a smooth transition. I am also open to continuing with specific projects, some that I have started or want to see succeed. Being committed to Yunesit'in, in the short term, I could see a role for myself in language revitalization, indigenous fire management, Dasiqox initiatives, community planning, housing and economic projects such as the greenhouses and guest house – even if it for the purpose of advising the new Council or gearing up new staff to resume the role. When I consider the gaps I filled as a leader, besides the governing role and finances, I have been involved in areas which Yunesit'in had an absence of dedicated staff, including: economic projects, energy, language, lands, some housing,

community planning, and communications.

There is also the expectation as Chief to resume the role as a director on the Council of Chiefs at the Tsilhqot'in National Government. Similar to Yunesit'in, there has been an increase of TNG staff from roughly 25 staff to 70 in roughly 6 years. All of the technical support assists leadership in decision making and carrying out the work, but in the interest of guiding the work, leaders are expected to become mid-level experts in everything: and these days, compressing the gap of generations, everything is a priority. At TNG, I am leaving as the Vice Chair and a portfolio holder to the Housing and Economic files. Although there will have to be some collective patience, I believe Housing is being equipped with staff and should be able to serve the Tsilhqot'in in building new homes and contribute in the way we resource materials, labour, governance and build our own economy. Economically, the solar farm that I got kickstarted with Ecosmart a few years ago turns out to be our first consistent revenue generator for Dandzen Corp and I foresee opportunities generated in various sectors to diversify the economy. We are still in the preliminary stages of nation-building and Yunesit'in leadership is required in helping guide these governing processes.

I will share that there is very little that can prepare you for being or becoming a leader, you just have to 'step up' with confidence and be ready to be thoughtful with your words and be genuinely responsive. As I returned to the community after the birth of Nalina, I remember greeting Margaret Setah outside the Community Hall and respectfully asked "Hunilht'ih?" She did not bother shaking my hand. Walking by me she said: "It's about time you showed up." I got humbled from the start and may never forget that. As a leader, I can say I often did my best to put my best effort forward even though I did not meet everybody's expectations. To guide the expectations placed on me, I was involved in most of the planning processes and I absorbed the voices of the community to represent Yunesit'in. I learned to be inquisitive, ask the right questions, and ensure I had enough information to make an informed decision.

The weight of responsibility can be immense. The long awaited Supreme Court of Canada decision for the Tsilhqot'in has changed the political landscape completely. As Tsilhqot'in, we managed to get the Crown, both the Province of BC and the Federal government, to acknowledge our story and the genocidal acts of the past; our war leaders were acknowledged for their efforts to defend the people from small pox. If there is a moment of reconciliation, it was the fact that our relationship could break conventions. We stood with drums in the House of Commons; we invited the Prime Minister to Tsilhqot'in land. Although I was there, representing the Tsilhqot'in, it was bigger than me. It was the weight of colonization, the spirit of our ancestors, and the reminder of all the hurt and loss along the way that we still need to overcome. The feeling of success as an Indigenous person becomes momentary and fleeting; returning home is a return to reality, tragedy and the legacy of abuse and oppression. Along the way, there are so many people to acknowledge and thank. I have a hard time signaling people out so I may just acknowledge people in general: the Myers family for giving me the confidence to run in the first place, the Yunesit'in Community and Council and loyal staff, the Tsilhqot'in Nits'il'in and dedicated staff, the executive of UBCIC and their helpful staff, the AFN regional Chiefs and their supportive staff, local organizations Denisiqi, Yeqox Nilin

Justice Society and Nenqayni Wellness, and the firms and groups that have helped Yunesit'in with the big projects, such as DNA, DK Architecture, Spruce Lee, Vector, Vision Quest, Ecotrust Canada, the Firelight Group, UBC and the IRSI team, FNHA, ISC, MNP, Carnotech, FPCC, NRT, Castlemain, Wilburforce, Ecosmart, ANTCO, Wellesley Consulting, Legacy Tourism, Gathering Voices Society, and apologies for those I am missing from the top of my head.

In closing, I will acknowledge I am not satisfied. I wanted to accomplish more. There are many areas to improve the community and the nation. At the community level, I leave unfinished infrastructure projects that I had hoped to initiate (community hall, fire hall, emergency centre, sports field, administration office, subdivision and district heating system, water irrigation and fire suppression system, cabins at Dechen Dilagh). At the nation level, I leave the unity accord and constitution in the wings, revenue sharing, consent regime, cumulative effects framework, research engagements, upgrades to the Lakeside site, among other plans and projects. I pray my voice echoes and that the work continues. I share this picture of the gym as a reminder that we are a community and nation under construction. We know the outcome because we imagined it, and in believing that it could happen, it will happen: and now we have a gym that brings the community together. As a leader, you have to stay positive, lead by example and always persevere.



(B) Project Updates

I am going to list much of my work since January and items to consider in moving forwards projects: Economic 1.0, Housing 2.0, Energy 3.0, Language 4.0, Lands 5.0, Infrastructure 6.0 and Community Planning 7.0.

Economic 1.0

1.1 Corporate Governance: The Yunesit'in Master General Partnership will separate some of the economic businesses from the Yunesit'in Government using Limited Partnership entities that will provide Liability protection and Tax exemptions. These businesses include: Yunesit'in Greenworks, Yunesit'in Guest House, Yunesit'in Forest to Frame, Yunesit'in Leading Edge and potentially other businesses as they get further developed. A new position will be created to manage these business entities and assist the new board members get established, which includes Gabe Pukacz, Ralph Myers, Molly Hink, Loni Solomon and Steve Oliver. Setting up the

businesses is a tremendous amount of legal work and I have been the leg work to making sure the dozens of governing documents are reviewed and signed.

1.2 Yunesit'in Greenworks: The Greenhouses are expecting to produce vegetables this year despite of the delays in getting the irrigation system reset due to covid-19. Norma Sulin is retained as the Grower and has started working on cleaning up the work site since April. A Work Plan is being developed to outline objectives, but this year and next is critical in re-adapting the Business Plan and determining whether it can draw enough revenue to be feasible. Because of the setbacks each year, servicing the construction debt with BMO has been unsatisfactory and there is a chance that paybacks will need to be made. This year Yunesit'in paid \$100,000.

1.3 Yunesit'in Guest House: The construction on the Guest House is underway and it is expected to be finished in September. We have been fortunate to receive funding from Rural Dividends, Northern Development Initiative Trust and ANTCO to assist with the construction and furnishing. Next steps will be made towards developing the marketing and policies for the operational part of the Business. A start date will have to be determined later in the autumn once the marketing is underway.

1.4 Yunesit'in Leading Edge: Admittedly, it took a lot longer than expected to get towards a closing date for purchase, however, Yunesit'in Government agreed on terms with Konrad Laffer to purchase Leading Edge, a milling facility in Horsefly that produces timber products primarily for housing. Final Purchase Agreements and Contacts are being finalized to sign. Gabe Pukacz, Jared Pukacz, Konrad Laffer and up to 4 trainees will be retained as employees. The Business Plan was completed by MNP. Once the final purchase is completed, Yunesit'in Leading Edge will be able to step up production and market the services.

1.5 Deer Creek Ranch: The Feasibility Study is near completion. An offer of \$2.7 million was tendered to the owner pending on the Feasibility Study and Financing. In a preliminary review of the Feasibility Study by Vision Quest it does not look good for economic activities relating to hay, cattle, root crop, and beef jerky. Cannabis remains feasible. Other options will need to be considered for financing.

1.6 Lee's Corner: A legal agreement is set up with the current owner but there has not been any activity to date on developing a Feasibility Study.

1.7 Gas Station & Convenience Store: Vision Quest completed the Business Plan last year; it will cost roughly \$1.5 million to develop the Business. Yunesit'in Government received funding from ISC to assist with the Designation Process, which is essentially a community vote on the specific surveyed location of the site. The community provided input on identifying a spot next to the Community Hall. Once the designation is complete, Yunesit'in Government is eligible for federal funding to assist in financing.

Housing 2.0

2.1 TNG Housing: As a portfolio holder, I tried to stay on top of the file and can say there is a lot of momentum in housing, albeit relatively slow to implement. Shawn Wiebe is managing a growing team. Consultants will be involved in the Investment Planning to determine how much funds will be allocated, out of the \$21.5 million from the federal government, to each community for new housing and renovations. A Housing Policy will be developed. Asset management will get started to profile homes and infrastructure in each community. There will be CMHC funding provided for a few houses to assist with renovations. I am appreciative that Shawn is working with me on the two projects I will highlight below: Indigenous Home-Lands Initiative and UBC Architecture Wild Fire Housing prototype.

2.2 Ecotrust Canada: The Indigenous Home-lands Initiative is led by Pamela Perreault and Anthony Persaud. While looking for funding for TNG and Yunesit'in, this initiative has provided analysis on our housing survey and has created a Housing Eco-system Overview and Strategy Development to guide and implement our actions for our Housing.

2.3 UBC Architecture: John Bass has had a chance to engage with the community and myself over the past couple years and we were fortunate to receive funding to assist in developing 1 project: a house that will be a prototype to research and include low-tech wild fire prevention technology. Right now, we need to finalize a person and place in Yunesit'in to build and continue discussions on materials and design. The relationship with UBC Architecture and with the UBC Indigenous Research Support group have been a great resource.

Energy 3.0

3.1 Energy Management System: For two years, I have promoted developing an Energy Management System with the assistance of Carnotech Energy. We sourced NRCan to provide funds to make the community ISO 50001 certified, which will make Yunesit'in the first Indigenous community to do so, it will measure energy data and save costs on energy used by our commercial buildings and provide further funding for energy projects.

3.2 Minton Creek Hydro: The Barkely Project Group, which completed the TNG Clean Energy Plan, is assisting with testing the hydrometrics on Minton Creek. James Smith works with the energy firm. A funding proposal is pending in January from NRT's BC Indigenous Clean Energy Initiative. However, the Council will apply funding to conduct the basic testing on the creek and allow for some analysis for the potential Feasibility Study. The Study will determine whether there is merit in generating electricity for revenue.

Language 4.0

4.1 Indigenous Language Grant: FPCC approved the proposal submitted by Yunesit'in Government and will contribute \$60,000 to continue to support the Language Committee, Language Courses, Personnel and other activities. While covid-19 will delay some activities, I anticipate that these programs will commence in the fall and winter months.

4.2 Language Revitalization Planning: Yunesit'in Government was granted the opportunity to apply as 1 of 10 First Nations offered due to our good track record with FPCC and have received

\$100,000. While we have an updated Language Revitalization Plan, the idea is to dive a bit deeper in integrating with the community programs and essentially putting a yearly budget together so that FPCC can fund us directly as opposed to going year-by-year submitting proposals. A Language Coordinator position will be posted this summer to start the work.

Lands 5.0

5.1 Special Claims: Union of BC Indian Chiefs organization was conducting research and will share the findings. I previously acquired the 200-page document from Indigenous Services Canada. Both of these documents need to be thoroughly read, possibly some legal advice should be made, and then the community and Council need to make a decision on which areas to select as being part of the claim. It will cost a bit to start up a claim in legal fees as affidavits will need to be made with Elders.

5.2 Dasiqox Nexwagwez7an: As a small team, Yunesit'in and Xenigwet'in have had to fill Jenna Dunsby's position and have selected Caitlin Thompson from Bella Coola to help coordinate all the project administration. She is an avid horse person, experienced in communications and media work, and has worked with the Nuhalk for a number of years. Roger William will continue the Traditional Law work, having completed interviews, and is now compiling the information which looks at the stories, the embodiment of Tsilhqot'in identity and understandings of Dechen Ts'edilhtan. Roger's work will be fused with Jonaki Bhattacharyya's work on the Management Plan. The Management Plan will be developed over time in both Yunesit'in and Xenigwet'in and be put out for review by the public.

5.3 TNG Land Use Planning: It has been 5 years since signing the Nenqay Deni Accord, and it has taken some time to be ready to develop the Land Use Plan as a Nation initiative. In each community, Nen Coordinators, are being hired to assist with gathering information and guiding community decisions. The concept of Category A and Category B will be the topic of discussion in terms of defining the legal framework and the governing models between the Crown and the Tsilhqot'in Nation. In my opinion, Category A should be considered 'Aboriginal Title' or akin to exclusive jurisdiction for the Tsilhqot'in Nation; I also think there should be connectivity to the landscape between communities and with the river and intact forests; it should also keep in mind that we, as a community and nation, have to thrive economically and ensure our food security on these lands. Category B is considered more in the framework of shared or joint decision making, where the Province and the Tsilhqot'in Nation make an agreement on the process of making decisions on the land.

5.4 Indigenous Fire Management: Working with Gathering Voices Society, in combination with Elhdaqox more recently, we have piloted one burn in the spring of 2019. Duane Hink and Jeffan Smith were the main participants, co-learning with Vic Steffensen. We now have funding for 3 years, Burn Plans were developed and submitted as referrals, Vic Steffensen will return once the travel bans are lifted, and we are on our way to conducting a Feasibility Study for upscaling the project and entertaining the potential of the carbon market.

5.5 Guardianship Program: Whether promoting fire management or the Dasiqox management

plan, the team behind these initiatives will eventually be Guardianship personnel. While we do not yet have core funding, we have been lucky enough to bring on Bonnie Myers, Aaron Myers, Jeffan Smith and Duane Hink over the past couple years. This year, we can pull together enough funds for up to 4 people over a short period, between 2-4 months. TNG is also putting together programs and training, along with the continued support to the Xeni Gwet'in Rangers, and we hope to have something more stabilized in the years to come. For me, the value of the Guardians is to help out the community, encourage people on the land, invite Elders out to tell their stories and apply them, if permissible, to the education that needs to be shared in our schools.

Infrastructure 6.0

6.1 Community Hall: Early on this year, we had a small meeting to discuss next steps in building or rebuilding the Community Hall. I tried to share that it may be an expensive endeavour to renovate and it may be worthwhile looking into building from scratch. I have a drafted proposal to be submitted, but the idea is to find a designer or architect that can begin the initial stages and begin estimating the costs to consider for financing.

Community Planning 7.0

7.1 Comprehensive Community Planning: The CCP team of Bonnie Myers, Jess Setah, Chio and myself have held meetings over the course of three years to provide feedback on designing an overarching plan on governance, lands and title, community development, economic development, infrastructure and public works, social programs and justice, health and wellness, education and employment, language and culture. The expectation of having a CCP is to have a set of community-led goals that informs leadership, administration and the community to make best efforts to realize. Castlemain has provided a first draft, a survey is to be completed before finalizing the next draft, a review by community, leaders and staff will need to take place, and then the CCP will enter into an implementation phase.

