

TIMES COLONIST

Truce reached on native cave "The cave will be protected," Bear Mountain CEO pledges

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Native leaders, government officials and Bear Mountain resort developers meet around a fire at the Tsartlip band longhouse yesterday to discuss a conflict over construction at a Skirt Mountain cave sacred to local First Nations. Bear Mountain CEO Len Barrie, far left, and other officials talk with native leaders, including Tom Sampson, right, of the Tsartlip band.

Bear Mountain developers and B.C. aboriginal leaders have stepped back from the brink of conflict, agreeing to a two-week truce and an attempt to reconcile their differences.

At a meeting in the Tsartlip longhouse yesterday, Bear Mountain Resort CEO Len Barrie promised local chiefs and Aboriginal Relations Minister Mike de Jong that construction will be stopped for the next two weeks within 100 metres of a cave sacred to local First Nations.

"The cave will be protected," said Barrie, a former NHL player, as smoke rose from a massive log fire in the centre of the room. Barrie also said the development group will not proceed with an application for a court injunction, filed yesterday morning against a small group of First Nations protesters who had been occupying the cave site since early Thursday morning.

The application was adjourned until Nov. 30. But the lawyers agreed either side can renew the application for an injunction on two-days notice if any protesters show up after tomorrow or work resumes. John Alexander, lawyer for the developer, said his client was concerned about "rogue" protesters arriving in spite of pleas from the Tsartlip and Songhees bands to keep away.

For his part, Tsartlip Chief Chris Tom said the protesters would leave the mountain. Barrie, who once threatened to blow up the cave, agreed to sit down and talk with the minister, the First Nations Leadership Council and local chiefs as long as they start the process right away.

"We'll work together with you people to come to a solution that's good for everybody," said Barrie. The Bear Mountain resort land the cave is on is considered the most valuable real estate on Langford's Skirt Mountain. Plans are to build high-density multi-family units on the site.

Members of the Songhees and Tsartlip nations are angry they were not consulted about archeological work that has damaged the cave. Although aboriginal people have been monitoring the site for the past six months, they were not invited to a key meeting Nov. 3 when a decision was made to take the roof off the cave and drain a subterranean lake. Now the cave is filled with tires and tree stumps.

Local First Nations are also upset by provincial heritage and conservation legislation that does not protect sacred sites, only sites with physical evidence of use. De Jong, who sat in the front row of the longhouse listening to speeches for about two hours, said some B.C. laws are out of date. He said he was ready to help the chiefs and Bear Mountain find a solution. "Maybe some of the respect, the passion and honesty shown in this longhouse today can be channelled and we can find a path to that resolution," he said.