

the prince george citizen

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Candidates stump on forestry

Gordon Hoekstra
Citizen staff

The B.C. Liberals continue to put forward a future-looking forest strategy that calls for developing new markets in China, better utilizing logging and wood waste to foster a biomass sector and pushing the use of wood in commercial buildings.

The Liberals are also examining ways to grow better trees faster, as part of their election platform.

The NDP is calling for a rollback of most of the sweeping forest policy changes introduced by the Liberals in 2003. That includes tying timber harvested to a community,

and reinstating rules that give the province oversight of mill closures and timber rights transfers.

Each party is pitching its election platform against heavy forestry job losses in northern B.C., more than 3,000 in the past two years. The mills closures, shift reductions and reduced work weeks have been a response to an unprecedented forestry downturn led by a collapse in U.S. housing starts. The fallout has been exacerbated by a global economic slowdown.

Prince George-Mackenzie NDP candidate Tobias Lawrence maintains the Liberal policy changes are the reason Prince George area mills are being closed, including in

Mackenzie, not the global economic slowdown.

One of the NDP's themes in its platform is that the Liberals have abandoned rural B.C. and forest-based communities like Mackenzie, north of Prince George.

"I don't buy it that our forest industry is in the state that it is because of the global economic crisis. It's just not true," says Lawrence, who has worked in the forest sector and also as NDP forestry critic Bob Simpson's constituency assistant.

Lawrence says the Liberals should have been doing more for forest-based communities, pointing to money earmarked for the

Olympics and a new roof for B.C. Place Stadium.

Pat Bell, who held the post of forests minister and is the Liberal candidate in Prince George-Mackenzie, dismisses Lawrence's assertion.

"Anyone that says they could fix the forest industry tomorrow is not telling the truth. The world market has shifted, and when you go from 60 to 65 billion board feet (of lumber) in the U.S., our major trading partner, down to 28 billion, you are going to feel the consequences, of that there's no doubt," said Bell, a business owner who has had experience in the logging sector.

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1 Theatre North West presents Sexy Laundry, a comedy about a couple who has been married for 25 years and would like to spice up their relationship. The curtain goes up at TNW, located in Parkhill Centre, at 8 tonight and Saturday.



2 Divine Desserts - All About Girlfriends is a fundraiser for the Minerva Foundation tonight at 7 at the Civic Centre. There are desserts, live performances and many activities geared for women. Tickets are \$50 each or a table of



3 Improv Ad Nauseam will be held at the Waddling Duck on Saturday night. Doors open at 7, show is at 8. Tickets are \$10 at Books & Co. or Meow Records.

4 Apres Cold Snap offers seriously cool jazz Saturday at Art Space at 8 p.m. with Bill Coon and Oliver Gannon in a concert called Two Much Guitar. This double guitar group was put together under the belief that there is no such thing as too much guitar.



FIT TO FIGHT — Anthony Kovacevic pulls a charged hose at the end of the pump and hose test Thursday morning at PGSS fields. Ministry of Forests fire suppression initial attack crew leaders were taking fitness tests that have to be done every year for forest fire fighters. Citizen photo by Brent Braaten

West Fraser sues over NCP fire

Citizen staff

West Fraser Timber has launched a lawsuit against Canfor and Interior Warehousing over the loss of inventory in the fire that destroyed North Central Plywood last May.

In a statement of claim filed in B.C. Supreme Court, West Fraser alleges the fire was due to Canfor's negligence in the maintenance and operation of the facility, particularly the dryers and because Interior Warehousing lacked a proper system to prevent the spread of the fire.

Specifically, West Fraser claims Canfor failed to keep the dryers and adjacent equipment in proper working order, to replace them when they had become outmoded and operated them when they knew or ought to have known fires would result.

West Fraser also claims Canfor failed to have a proper sprinkler system in place.

With respect to Interior Warehousing, West Fraser claims the company lacked firefighting equipment and trained personnel to fight the blaze, lacked a proper sprinkler system and stored combustible materials in a hazardous location.

West Fraser is seeking damages for the loss of 918 units of medium density fibreboard but no dollar figure was provided in the statement of claim, which was filed in Vancouver on Feb. 13. Statements of defence from Canfor and Interior Warehousing Ltd. have not been filed.

Mortgage payments fall

Mark Nielsen
Citizen staff

Mortgage payments on homes in northern B.C. have tumbled 18 per cent over the past year, according to the B.C. Real Estate Association, falling to a level not seen in two and a half years.

The average payment as of March stood at \$960, a \$209 drop from the same point last year.

"That's pretty exciting news," said B.C. Northern Real Estate Board director Gary Shannon.

The decline follows a province-wide trend that saw a 24-per-cent decrease year over year and the average sale price declined 12 per cent.

"Reduced mortgage interest rates have effectively doubled the impact of lower home prices on affordability," said BCREA chief economist Cameron Muir.

Housing in B.C. is now more affordable than at any time in three years, he added.

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Another Luongo-like save!

Goalie Seth Rhodes, 10, makes a big save in a scrum with Samuel Dalla Lana, 11, left, Dakota Auberton, 11, and Steve Rhodes, on Wolverine Crescent. Playoff hockey is spreading to the streets now. The real Roberto Luongo is back in action tonight for the Vancouver Canucks.

Citizen photo by David Mah

Prices down, sales up

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The frontrunner is northern B.C. where mortgage payments are the lowest, as is the average price of a single family home at \$195,592.

Compared to the peak of a year ago, the market for the region, which stretches from 100 Mile House to Fort Nelson, remains less active, but month-over-month numbers are showing signs of resurgence.

The average price for March represents a drop of \$15,865 from February, but sales jumped by 51 to 228.

As well, active listings stood at 2,402, up 103 from the month before and the sales to active listings ratio was 9.5 per cent, up from 7.8 per cent in February.

"Anytime you can pay \$209 a month less than you were paying a year ago is a substantial savings and that's a great incentive for

buyers of any kind," Shannon said.

"And there's still some decent selection out there, so as long as people can get their act together and get going soon, they can take advantage of that.

"The longer they wait, the harder it's going to be for those deals to be there. As we get more and more business and more and more sales, it's going to have an effect on values, they will start to go up."

First-quarter statistics for Prince George, released April 2, show an average price of \$233,725 on sales of 151 homes, an increase of \$1,641 and five sales over the fourth quarter last year.

After peaking at \$246,839 in March 2008, the average price had been on a decline, but remains slightly above the level seen two years ago.

Liberal policy not to blame for job losses, Bell says

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He also points to the fact that B.C. has maintained its traditional 57- to 58-per-cent share of the Canadian lumber exports to the U.S.

"To say we've deserted rural communities, that's nonsense," asserted Bell, seeking his third term.

Mackenzie has been hit particularly hard with an estimated 1,600 jobs lost in the community of 4,500. All of its major forest manufacturing plants are closed — four sawmills, a newsprint mill, a pulp mill and a secondary lumber mill — and some are not expected to reopen even when the forest sector turns around, perhaps beginning in 2010.

Prince George, although it has shown more resilience, has also seen its share of closures and shift reductions. Winton Global's lumber plant has been down since last year, and Canfor decided not to rebuild its North Central Plywoods plant after it burned down last May. There have also been shift reductions at Canfor, Lakeland and Carrier Lumber.

Bell has decided to hang his hat on trying to open up new markets in China and build

a bioenergy and biofuel sector, arguing that will create a healthier basis for the long-term viability of the forest sector.

The plan is to do that under the rules and tenures already established, pushing forest companies to form business relationships with new bioenergy and biofuel companies and awarding wood-waste licences where necessary.

The province is investing more than \$30 million in bioenergy and biofuel projects in the Prince George area, including a \$21.7-million project recently announced at the University of Northern B.C. A bioenergy plant in the Prince George area has also been shortlisted by B.C. Hydro.

Bell also says he would like to pilot some short-rotation tree plantations to fuel biomass projects, likely utilizing a hybrid poplar hardwood tree already used in Alberta.

Also with an eye to the future, Bell said he is open to examining different forms of tenure to replant forests and increase pro-



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ductivity, now undertaken largely by the companies that cut the trees. In the interim, the province will continue to invest \$50 million a year in intensive silviculture.

The Liberals are also examining extending a program that used \$129 million from Ottawa to retrain forest workers, provide pension bridging and create work projects. They have not said how much money they would add.

The Liberals have shown no appetite for changing the softwood lumber agreement or changing its log export rules, which allows exports in certain circumstances.

The New Democrats assert that the Liberals have neglected silviculture, but have not presented a specific program on how much they would invest in treeplanting or improving productivity.

The NDP have also said they would create a new worker transition program, although they have also not said how much will be invested.

Lawrence said the two programs — silvi-

culture and worker training — could tap into a rural economic development fund. The NDP have earmarked \$200 million for that fund in the next year.

The New Democrats have also said they want to reduce wood waste and get more value from B.C.'s timber utilizing new technology, although they have provided no details on their plans or how much money they plan to invest. Those plans include fostering a bioenergy sector, said Lawrence.

The New Democrats are also calling for the reform of the province's timber tenure system, although Lawrence said they are not contemplating clawing back long-term timber rights.

Instead, the NDP plan to establish a permanent forestry commission to guide changes.

Lawrence said the softwood lumber agreement needs to be renegotiated so that it allows the province to help communities and forest companies. The NDP have also said they will restrict log exports, although no details have been released on how. Lawrence said the NDP will want to look at log exports from private lands which fall under federal jurisdiction.