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Native land claim halts huge Rockcliffe development Negotiations block sale of former airbase

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A native land claim has blocked the sale of the former Canadian Forces Base Rockcliffe and delayed plans for a residential eco-district for up to 15,000 people.

The former airbase is part of an outstanding claim for most of Eastern Ontario by Ontario's Algonquin natives, who are in negotiations with the provincial and federal governments.

"Our objective is to make sure what happens there will be of some benefit to Algonquin people," said Bob Potts, the Algonquins' Toronto lawyer.

The Algonquin claim covers an area of 3.5 million hectares (36,000 square kilometres), within the watersheds of the Ottawa and Mattawa rivers in Ontario. It includes most of Algonquin Park as well as the national capital region.

Canada Lands Company, a Crown corporation, has been proceeding with plans for an environmentally sustainable development; a mix of 4,500 to 6,000 houses and apartments, as well as offices, research institutions, shops and parks.

The National Capital Commission is to take 10 hectares for a museum.

In November 2005, the federal Treasury Board approved the sale of the land for \$27 million to Canada Lands, which had been trying to buy it from the federal department of National Defence since 1996.

Canada Lands expected the transfer to take place in three to six months. They are still waiting.

"We decided to slow down the work on the project until we can get title," said Jim Lynes, acting president and CEO of Canada Lands.

"We're asking our consultants to put on hold any new work. We're not going to do any other public open houses until we actually get title."

A third open house had been planned for June 19.

Mr. Lynes said Canada Lands has already spent "lots" of money. "We don't want to increase our (financial) exposure on something we don't own."

So far, they have prepared a concept plan, removed old rail lines, surveyed plant species and began considering aspects of traffic, engineering and sustainability.

"We're disappointed that there's going to be a hiatus in the momentum," said Jane Brammer, who heads a group of community associations monitoring the development. "This project was pushing a lot of boundaries in order to be a real landmark. There's a

lot of concern that everybody will go to sleep again."

Construction was to start in late 2008, and the first residents were to move in by 2009.

Mr. Lynes said he hoped to resume planning activities by the end of the year.

To allow the project to proceed, he said Canada Lands has asked the Algonquins to negotiate Rockcliffe separately from the overall claim, which could take years. They appear prepared to do so, he said.

"Our hope is that they will be able to deal with our issue in the next six to eight months," he said. "Our hope is that ... our work won't be lost."

The design and sustainability consultants are still under contract although dates for delivering services have changed.

"We're very committed to the plan," said Mr. Lynes. "I think this is the most exciting thing we've done."

Warning signs were visible in November 2005, when the Treasury Board approved the sale.

At that time, Chief Kirby Whiteduck, who leads the Pikwakanagan Algonquins based on Golden Lake about 130 kilometres west of Ottawa, told the Citizen the base was part of their Ottawa-area land claim.

Chief Whiteduck said his band had expressed interest to the federal government and to Canada Lands Company in managing or owning a quarter of the site. "We might be interested in housing for Algonquin people," he said. "We want to be consulted. We want to be involved."

However, a Department of National Defence spokesman said the matter was closed. He said the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs had consulted with the Algonquins regarding Rockcliffe between 1998 and 2002.

As a result, he said, DND "was advised by (Indian Affairs) that it would not be acquiring lands in settlement of the First Nations comprehensive land claim. The department is therefore ... to proceed with the sale of these surplus lands."

That statement was based on the fact that negotiations had collapsed in 2001.

But in 2005, the Golden Lake Algonquins joined forces with nine other Ottawa area Algonquin communities to elect a new negotiating team.

In January 2006, both Canada and Ontario agreed to restart negotiations.

"Today, we're at the zenith of that exercise," said Mr. Potts.

He said he didn't know what form the compensation would take.

"They want something that will fit into their economic development plan ... that will allow them to sustain and grow the culture, which has so long been deprived because the treaty wasn't done."

An overall settlement agreement could contain elements that address ownership of lands and natural resources, hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering rights, money, and economic opportunities and provisions to promote Algonquin culture.

Last year, the Algonquin reached an undisclosed settlement with the City of Ottawa over claims to a section of federal land in Ottawa's Greenbelt where the now-cancelled light-rail train would have crossed.

"We reached an accommodation that allowed for light-rail transit to proceed ... we're taking the same businesslike approach here," said Mr. Potts.

He said they hope to have a tentative statement of their expectations by September, which would include Rockcliffe, and an agreement in principle by 2010.

"We hope to be able to address the Algonquins' interest while moving the (Rockcliffe) project along in a timely manner," added a spokeswoman for the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. "Things are going really well and progressing."

The claim was formally submitted to the Government of Canada in 1983 and the Government of Ontario in 1985 by the Algonquins of Golden Lake (now known as the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan).

The Ontario government accepted the claim for negotiations in 1991 and the Canadian government in 1992.

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