

FRIENDS OF THE MORDEN MINE

CO-PRESIDENTS' REPORT

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

November 6th, 2014
Nanaimo Museum

THE YEAR OF THE ROLLER COASTER RIDE

For your society it has been an eventful year of many ups and downs. I offer the following recap:

At last year's AGM I reported that the new Minister of the Environment, Ms. Mary Polak, had decided not to see a delegation from our society even though our business was of significant importance and based on the chief recommendation contained in the 2013 engineering report commissioned by her predecessor, Terry Lake. That recommendation was to proceed to a more detailed study of the cost of fixing the headframe and tibble.

Not too long after the AGM BC Parks refused to fund the detailed study that is needed and it seemed that we had rather abruptly reached a dead end – and all because a new minister was uninterested in being properly briefed on a provincial park of over 40 years standing.

At about the same time as Ms. Polak was slamming the door on Morden, she announced that an extra \$2 millions had been found to secure the purchase of a piece of inaccessible, steep-sloped land on Quadra Island to add to one of that small island's three provincial parks – at the same time increasing the government's contribution to this land purchase to a total of approximately \$4.6 millions.

Thus, for the first time, the government signaled through these two actions that it isn't much interested in Morden's future: several million dollars made available for Quadra Island – not so much as a token contribution made available for a much needed engineering study for Morden Mine.

At this point I met with RDN Director Maureen Young, and we decided that an approach should be made to both local governments in the area to see if they would be willing to fund the needed study. After all, we reasoned, Morden is surviving on borrowed time and any more time lost in determining what must be done simply adds to the risk as well as to the eventual cost of repairs.

While our request worked its way through RDN channels, and subsequently through those of the City, I had the good fortune to be introduced to Hugh Nicholson, who had assumed the position of publisher of the *Nanaimo Daily News* when it was acquired by Glacier Media. Hugh had just written an editorial expounding the benefits of developing a coal mine museum on Nanaimo's waterfront and asked for my reaction. I immediately invited him to visit the Morden property where over 10 acres is available for a museum or, more appropriately, an interpretation centre. He accepted the invitation and in short order we visited the site, accompanied by John Hofman and *Daily News* managing editor Mark MacDonald. Afterwards we retired to the Crow and Gate for lunch and a discussion of Morden's problems as well as its prospects.

And thus began a new relationship with the *Daily News*. At my suggestion, Hugh put together a "blue ribbon" community committee to assist our efforts and arranged for John and myself to make a presentation to the "Yes Nanaimo" committee, a group of active and retired business personalities who meet regularly to discuss ways in which Nanaimo can be further developed. At the same time coverage of Morden-related matters in the *Daily News* picked up pace, including four editorials within the space of a few months.

However, just as we were picking up steam, Hugh's good friend Jim Flaherty, the federal finance minister, fell ill and suddenly passed away. That was a big loss as the personal connection between these two men had paid large dividends back in 2009 when Hugh was a resident of Prince George. Nearly \$250 millions of infrastructure spending had found its way into the Prince George area at that time and Hugh had played a significant role in making it happen. Infrastructure funding is the only realistic basis for securing a future for Morden Mine.

About four months and several Morden-focused newspaper stories later, Hugh accepted the job opportunity of a lifetime, in Toronto, and left the Glacier Media operation. Shortly after that, editor Mark MacDonald resigned and the editorship of the *Daily News* was turned over to Philip Wolf, who has since advised me that the newspaper will continue to offer strong support for our efforts.

In the late spring both the RDN and the City of Nanaimo councils unanimously approved our request for funding for the needed engineering study. Dave Shillabeer, a retired civil engineer and member of our board, and I constituted a committee to review submissions in response to an RFP we issued to the three companies that had previous experience assessing structural problems at Morden.

All submitted very appealing proposals. Selecting one for the job was not an easy decision to make. But after a careful analysis the firm of Read Jones Christoffersen (RJC) was chosen. RJC put together a team that included a highly trained specialist in strength of materials; a specialist in concrete repairs, and a construction estimator with a great deal of experience in dealing with difficult projects. Personnel from three different companies contributed to the study, the findings and recommendations of which you will learn about this evening when Jason Kinch, leader of the project team, presents RJC's report.

Some other activities and developments this past year should also be mentioned.

First, all of the Morden-related newspaper coverage led to an increased number of mine site tours. Of these, the most notable was undertaken by a delegation of Mongolian parliamentary representatives in early September. This delegation visited both BC and Alberta to learn about best mining practices and the history of coal deposit development. It was especially interested in learning about community contributions by mining companies, tax and royalty regimes, reclamation work, and so forth. I can report that members of this tour were disappointed to learn that the only provincial park that honours our coal mining past is, as far as the current minister is concerned, surplus to requirements with its future apparently lying in “divestment.”

Second, a project to install a plaque commemorating the 100th anniversary of the headframe and tibble is now in its final stages. The design work is finished and the plaque is currently in production. It will be installed in the new viewing area on the back side of the headframe when good weather returns in the early spring.

Third, several video vignettes produced in 2012 have been uploaded to YouTube and may be found by visiting YouTube’s Friends of Morden Mine channel. Among these vignettes are two versions of David Gogo’s celebrated song, “She’s Breakin’ Through,” which honours the memory of David’s great-grandfather, one of many victims of a flood in the first PCCM mine in South Wellington in the early 20th century. David’s rendition of this song is performed against the backdrop of Morden’s headframe and tibble. Among the several additional YouTube video vignettes there is one focused on the structural problems of the headframe and tibble, and two which examine and describe early coal mining artifacts on display from the collections of David Gogo and our Vice-President, Tom Paterson.

Fourth but certainly not least in significance, is some news I regret to have to report: Our long-time newsletter and website editor Frances Christopherson has been hospitalized for some time as a result of an injury. Consequently, the regular September issue of the newsletter was not published this year and work has been suspended on our project to further update our website and to modernize it for the benefit of tablet, smart phone and android device users.

To sum up:

As we head towards a new year, once again Morden’s fate hangs in the balance. In the absence of Hugh Nicholson, our breakthrough last year of establishing key community support for Morden remains tenuous at best. And the government’s failure to offer any kind of support for the engineering study, as well as its late-summer pronouncement that it wishes to “divest” itself of Morden, strike an ominous note.

On the bright side, however, the decision of both municipal councils to step up to the plate and fund the current engineering study shows clearly that the people of this region want Morden saved and developed. Moreover, the RDN's decision to proceed with re-bridging of the Nanaimo River in 2016 where the PCCM railway trestles once stood could prove to be a game changer that may help get the government back on side. The re-bridging project will involve the construction of two spans, each joining an island in the middle of the river. As of this writing the look of the two spans had not yet been decided, but the RDN is actively considering both suspension and truss designs. No matter the final choice, the bridges will be a spectacular project in their own right and, by means of a short 10 to 15 minute walk, Morden will be linked to the heart of Cedar and beyond to the southern end of Hemer Provincial Park. It should become a valuable tourist asset for the restaurants and bed and breakfast operators in Cedar.

All that said, the future of Morden Colliery Historic Provincial Park is effectively beyond our control. We've been at pains to tell the government that our organization is not in a position to assume responsibility for raising the funds to fix the headframe and tibble. Nor is it in a position to further develop the park. We've also been at pains to inform the government that no one else will come to Morden's rescue if the government itself is not prepared to invest in the park. Whether Friends of the Morden Mine will have any role to play in the future will very much depend upon how all governments respond to the engineering study being presented this evening.

Eric Ricker, co-president (also on behalf of John Hofman, co-president, who is unable to attend this evening)