

**The Sen'ákw Project: How First Nations May Leverage Real Estate
for a Brighter Future**

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Introduction

In an effort to address the consequences caused to First People (or Aboriginal) since colonization until actual times, society recognized the harness and has tried to reconcile. As part of this process, it was established that these groups have the ownership of lands that their ancestors settled in the past (Wilson & Henderso, 2014). Squamish ancestors had a village at Senákw, where the lands and waters were ideal for fishing, hunting, and harvesting traditional resources, in a place that today is a misshapen portion of a former reserve near False Creek, close to Downtown Vancouver, a very-valued land (Westbank Projects Corp., n.d.).

At first, as a good example of governance, they established an entity named Nch'kay to develop and manage the business on behalf of the nation's interests (Nch'kay Corporation, n.d.). Given the Squamish Nation relies heavily on leasing revenue, developing reserve lands could ensure financial security in the future, assisting their needs as health assistance and post-secondary education funding.

So the Squamish Nation realized they could use False Creek's lands to build a residential site called the "Senákw Project" that would create 6,000 rental homes (Westbank Projects Corp., n.d.), bringing long-term financial sustainability and making them a significant player in the Vancouver housing market (Westbank Projects Corp., n.d.).

The project raises significant issues about community engagement and participation. As First Nation's lands are not considered part of the city, the project was not subject to the city's typical development approval process and was subject to severe controversy (The Canadian Press, 2023). It has raised much opposition due to

the impact it will provoke in the region and, to the full extent, even in relations between Aboriginal people and real estate market stakeholders.

Project's main stakeholders

Due to this project's impact in City's development and Indigenous-related business scenario, it generates outcomes and consequences for numerous stakeholders, whose most important are:

1. Squamish Nation

The Squamish Nation, or Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Úxwumixw, are a modern and vibrant people with a rich cultural heritage. They have occupied and governed their lands since beyond recorded history. In 1923, Squamish People requested that the Federal Department of Indian Affairs incorporate different Indian Bands into a single organization to strengthen governance. This entity was to be called the Squamish Nation (About Squamish Nation, 2024).

Today, the Squamish Nation consists of 23 villages governed by an elected council consisting of one Chairperson and seven Councilors, an elected Band Manager, and the Nation Administration (Nch'kay Corporation, n.d.). The majority of the people live on reserves within their traditional territory – around Vancouver, North Shore, Squamish and Whistler – balancing their traditions like language, art and ceremonies, with urban aspects like education, career and economic prosperity (*About Squamish Nation*, 2024).

Squamish people rely heavily on leasing revenue to support health assistance and post-secondary education funding (Freestone & Panahov, 2023). To do this, they own several businesses, such as marinas, restaurants, gas stations, RV parks and even a forestry company (Wilson & Henderso, 2014).

2. Nch'kay Development Corporation

Nch'kay was established in 2018 as the economic development arm of the Squamish Nation. Its goal is to develop, manage, and own the active businesses of the Nation, promoting financial independence and sustainability, as well as allowing the separation of business and politics within the Squamish Nation (Nch'kay Corporation, n.d.).

The corporation plays a crucial role in the Nation's strategy to leverage its land and resources, focusing on real estate development, infrastructure projects, and business ventures that benefit the community's prosperity.

Mindy Wight is the actual Chief Executive Officer of Nch'kay Development Corporation. She actually has roots in the Squamish Nation since she is a member of the Nanini family, and part of her education was funded by the Squamish Nation. She has over fifteen years of experience in financial accounting, taxation, and business (Nch'kay Corporation, n.d.).

Another important member of the Executive Team is Sean Ruzicka. In his Executive Vice President, Business Development and Partnerships role, he leads efforts to identify and develop new business opportunities and foster strategic partnerships (Nch'kay Corporation, n.d.).

3. Westbank Projects Corp.

Westbank is one of North America's leading mixed-use real estate development companies, creating residential, hotels, retail, and creative workspace units (*Westbank*, n.d.). It's based in Vancouver, BC, and is known for uniquely designed projects. For example, some of its impactful buildings in Vancouver are Alberni by Kengo Kuma, Deloitte Summit Building and Vancouver House – this last was awarded Future Project of the Year at the 2015 World Architecture Festival (*Vancouver House Campus / UCW*, n.d.).

The company was established 30 years ago, in 1992, by Ian Gillespie, who remains the company's CEO. It now has over \$25 billion of projects completed or under development and employs 1,800 people (*Ian Gillespie (Developer)*, n.d.).

Westbank is known for taking bold steps in sustainability, using eco-friendly material like mass timber in construction, and designing transportation infrastructure like bicycle parking, solar shading and green roofs in their projects (*Westbank*, n.d., page "A Culture Company").

They partnered with Nch'kay' Development Corporation to build the Sen'ákw Project, creating a significant milestone in Indigenous-led development (Nch'kay' Corporation, n.d., page "Q&A").

4. Federal and City Government

The Sen'ákw Project site is on Squamish reserve land – unceded Indigenous land – and, therefore, under the Federal Government's jurisdiction. Regarding this fact, the

development process wasn't subject to standard municipal approval processes (The Canadian Press, 2023).

In a political dimension, the federal government also recognizes Indigenous rights and promotes their economic independence. Prime Minister Trudeau participated in September 2022 of a groundbreaking ceremony at the foot of the Burrard Street Bridge and called the federal government support "reconciliation in action" (The Canadian Press, 2023). Besides that, in 2021, the federal government provided a \$1.4 billion loan to facilitate the development, underscoring its commitment to supporting Indigenous-led initiatives.

The City of Vancouver plays a unique role in the Senákw Project. The municipality has collaborated with the Westbank and Squamish Nation to address community concerns and ensure infrastructure needs are met.

The city will benefit from the addition of 6,000 new rental units, which will significantly contribute to alleviating Vancouver's housing crisis (Westbank Projects Corp., n.d.).

5. Kits Point Residents Association

In Canada, it is usual that citizens group themselves in an organization to represent common interests and concerns about the neighbourhood or district in which they live. These organizations have a crucial role in urban governance, serving as a voice in discussions with local governments or city councils.

The Kits Point Residents' Association (KPRA) represents 1,100 households, 60% rentals, and is situated north of Cornwall Avenue and east of Arbutus Street – close to the new Senákw residential site (*Kits Point Residents Association*, n.d.).

The Association's initial concerns, raised in 2020, focused on the scale of the Development and the limited availability of public information. They centred on the Development's size and density, the height of the towers, and the impact on neighbouring residential communities, including on traffic, infrastructure, and the use of Vanier Park (*Kits Point Residents Association*, n.d., page "Senakw Tower Development").

In October 2022, Residents' association director Eve Munro and member Benjamin Peters filed a court petition in October 2022 seeking to suspend the project, arguing the City of Vancouver shouldn't have agreed to provide municipal services and infrastructure to the Development and that the City was unwilling to share information about the Development of the project (The Canadian Press, 2023).

Main Challenges for Indigenous Businesses

Indigenous businesses face unique challenges, including limited business experience, restricted access to education, underdeveloped infrastructure in many communities, and cultural barriers. As a source for an Indigenous point of view, Meraji and Demby (2016–present) conducted three interviews with Jack Smith, a Squamish Nation member. His insights contribute with a realistic perspective.

1. Limited business experience

Unfortunately, many Indigenous communities show limited business experience, mainly as a consequence of historical marginalization. Colonization, systemic discrimination, and restrictive policies like the ones imposed by the Indian Act disrupted traditional economic systems (like fishing, farming and hunting). It excluded Indigenous peoples from participating in the “urban” market.

As a result, Indigenous people have had fewer opportunities to develop essential business skills, such as financial management, project planning, and negotiation. (Episode 1, minute 19)

Besides that, history has shown that this scenario made Indigenous people dependent on government support, as they don't have the skills and experience to start and run businesses.

One potential solution to this challenge is to assist them through accelerators or incubators. These programs can offer mentorship and advisory, helping Indigenous entrepreneurs to start and develop viable and profitable companies. (Episode 7, minute 18).

As the leadership of some First Nations wanted to encourage economic development, they kickstarted the establishment of Economic Development Corporations. (Episode 1, minute 14)

2. Limited access to formal education

The Squamish Nation faces challenges related to limited access to formal education. Historically, government policies restricted Indigenous people's

participation in educational systems. One significant example was the existence of Residential Schools (Calder, 2017, section “Residential Schools Apology”): operating from the 1830s until the late 1990s, these government-funded institutions were established aiming to eradicate Indigenous languages, traditions, and identities and replace them with Western values and Christianity. These schools forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families and suppressed their cultural identities. In this way, many members of the Squamish community did not have the same opportunities to pursue higher education, vocational training, or professional programs as non-Indigenous Canadians.

In this context, it is very challenging for them to acquire knowledge about business management, so First Nation’s people have to struggle to educate youth, particularly in entrepreneurship. (Episode 7, minute 7)

Moreover, limited educational access also reduces opportunities for professional networking and access to high-paying careers, perpetuating cycles of economic inequality.

3. Limited or Underdeveloped infrastructure

There are more than 600 Indigenous communities in Canada, many of which are located in remote areas where infrastructure, internet access, and formal education are limited or even inaccessible. (Episode 9, minute 2) (Freestone & Panahov, 2023)

The Squamish Nation, based in British Columbia lands, is responsible for the management of 26 First Nations reserves located around the Capilano River, Mosquito

Creek, and Seymour River on North Vancouver and along the Squamish River.

Nowadays, almost all of them have access to infrastructure, but this is not the case for other Indigenous reserves, such as northern ones (Episode 7, minute 7); some of them we can find in Northern Ontario or Saskatchewan.

These remote reserves still suffer from poor transportation infrastructure, which limits access to essential services, including healthcare and education, unsafe housing, poor sanitation (Episode 7, minute 7), and limited access to clean drinking water (Episode 12, minute 3).

All these issues restrict economic opportunities for Indigenous people.

4. Cultural and Social barriers

Many Indigenous individuals face internal conflicts between staying in the community and seeking opportunities elsewhere. They have strong cultural values and a connection to their heritage, so they desire to remain in their communities despite the limited employment opportunities (Episode 12, minute 3). Besides that, their reserves often represent traditional territories with deep spiritual and cultural meaning to them (Episode 5, minute 10): the land is seen as a source of identity, and staying connected to it is essential for maintaining cultural practices and traditions.

Regarding business, Indigenous peoples historically demonstrated skills such as trading fish, fur, and other resources they fostered. The Indian Act, however, confined them to reserves, causing them to lose their ability to trade and engage in commerce. Additionally, many governmental policies created a dependency legacy. (Episode 1, minute 8).

Unfortunately, the alternative – moving to urban areas – presents another challenge: discrimination and racism. Indigenous people often face discrimination in urban areas, making it difficult to find housing, employment, and social acceptance.

Sen'ákw Project Stakeholders and Challenges Analysis

The Sen'ákw Project involves a numerous stakeholders, each with distinct interests and degrees of influence. This analysis examines key players and explores how their interests intersect with the challenges Indigenous businesses face.

Table 1

Sen'ákw Project main Stakeholders and Challenges to its success

#	Stakeholders	Analysis outline of significant points	Challenges			
			1 Limited business experience	2 Limited access to formal education	3 Limited or Underdeveloped infrastructure	4 Cultural and social barriers
1	Squamish Nation	<i>Low power, High interests</i> Interests: rental revenue Influence: other First Nations		IV		III
2	Nch'kay Development Corporation	<i>Low power, High interests</i> Interests: develop business Influence: other First Nations; media				
3	Westbank Projects Corp.	<i>High power, High interests</i> Interests: revenue; create a path to access other First Nation's lands to develop similar residential projects	I			

		Influence: other development corporations; financial market players				
4	Federal and City Government	<i>High power, Medium interests</i> Interests: create housing units; support First Nation's people Influence: decides regulations			II	
5	Kits Point Residents Association	<i>Low power, High interests</i> Interests: minimize impacts caused by this project; improve neighbourhood; avoid rental rate increases Influence: boycotts, media

In Table 1, the four most significant relationships between stakeholders and challenges are presented (I, II, III, and IV). Certain tasks may offer strategic opportunities to develop solutions and address these challenges.

I. Westbank Projects Corp. → Limited business experience

Westbank can contribute to a significant improvement in economic and social aspects for Indigenous peoples. Its partnership with Nch'kay West in the Sen'ákw Project may become the first of many similar projects, considering that Indigenous peoples have protected lands in other cities or provinces, which can be valuable to developing home and commercial units.

1. Establish or fund business schools specifically designed for Indigenous people, which programs should prioritize and develop essential business skills, such as financial management, project planning, and negotiation.

2. Provide mentorship, resources, and access to capital, helping Indigenous entrepreneurs develop crucial business skills and create sustainable, independent enterprises. This direct investment could fund university-based projects and boost innovative ideas.
3. Establish accelerators and incubators on reserves, providing newly-created businesses not only physical spaces but also crucial networking opportunities and access to industry experts.
4. Publicize the successes of this project, as the Squamish Nation's leadership in the Sen'ákw project can inspire and empower other Indigenous communities to pursue similar ventures (Stewart, 2024, section "A model for other First Nations").

II. Federal and City Government → Limited or Underdeveloped infrastructure

Federal and City Governments may address the limited and underdeveloped infrastructure on Indigenous reserves in the following ways:

1. Create regulations that mandate a percentage of profits from Development Projects like Sen'ákw to increase funding dedicated to infrastructure development on reserves, ensuring transparent allocation and accountability for project completion and long-term maintenance.
2. Ratify Indigenous Land Ownership Policies to recognize and respect Indigenous land ownership rights fully. This will be an incentive for other lands to be used in similar projects, enabling more accessible access to financing for infrastructure development.

3. Promote and fund sustainable infrastructure solutions, such as renewable energy and water management systems, to solve reserve problems.
4. Extend municipal services like water and sewage treatment to nearby reserves through partnerships and shared infrastructure agreements. They can be a mandatory counterpart for a contractor participating in new projects.
5. Offer tax incentives and easier permitting processes to encourage private sector investment in infrastructure projects on reserves. This can leverage additional funding and expertise.

III. Squamish Nation → Cultural and Social barriers

As the Squamish Nation leaders are innovating the concept of a project applying Indigenous Peoples' territories and the economic opportunity to develop residential rental units, they can also create practices to embrace Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures through these opportunities:

1. Develop cultural programs that facilitate exchanges between Squamish and non-Indigenous communities. This could involve sharing traditional knowledge and practices through workshops and cultural events. Squamish participants could visit museums and historical sites to learn about non-Indigenous cultures and perspectives.
2. Create exchange programs similar to summer camps where Squamish youth visit non-Indigenous communities and vice versa, offering a

powerful way to reduce cultural gaps. Non-indigenous students would break down stereotypes and misconceptions, and Indigenous students would experience different ways of life and build relationships.

3. Empower youth through Education so they will become active agents of change in promoting inclusivity and combating bullying and discrimination while advocating for policy changes.

IV. Squamish Nation → Limited access to formal education

The Squamish Nation faces the challenge of limited access to formal education due to various factors. It can actively work to overcome these obstacles by addressing some leverage points:

1. Expand and enhance on-reserve education, using the profits collected from the Sen'ákw project to ensure that schools on reserves have adequate facilities, technology, and resources to provide a modern and engaging learning environment.
2. Increase access to off-reserve education through transportation or housing assistance and establish partnerships with post-secondary institutions in the short term. In the second moment, establish branches of these institutions by funding their construction and maintenance.
3. Expand temporary housing programs to newly built homes. Of all the 6,000 housing units constructed in Sen'ákw, 250 – only 4% – will be subsidized to be rented to members of the Squamish Nation at lower prices than in the market. Although this will improve families' ability to

work in better jobs in a major city like Vancouver, Squamish Nation could reserve more units.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the Sen'ákw project is an important initiative aimed at achieving the financial sustainability of the Squamish Nation. It promises to generate long-term passive income, empowering the Nation's leaders to enhance living conditions for their people, particularly by investing in education and providing housing support.

This is an ambitious large-scale project backed by billions in investments from the federal government and private developers such as Westbank. Leveraging laws that grant land ownership to Indigenous peoples will not only create significant development in the city of Vancouver but also help improving housing availability for regular citizens.

A crucial aspect of the project is the unprecedented involvement of an Indigenous community in a venture of this scale. This represents both an opportunity and a challenge. The project's success will depend on how effectively the generated resources are used to improve the quality of life for First Nations members while avoiding risks such as corruption or undue political influence. Another critical concern is how the local community will interact with its new neighbours, who come from distinct cultural and educational backgrounds.

As the project unfolds, with the first buildings scheduled for completion in 2025, we will begin seeing real-world outcomes.

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