

Carla Wilson's favourite: Shipyard workers look to a brighter future

BY CARLA WILSON, TIMESCOLONIST.COM DECEMBER 24, 2011



Carla Wilson

Photograph by: Darren Stone, timescolonist.com

A struggling B.C. industry saw a rare turnaround when Seaspan won the right to negotiate \$8 billion worth of federal shipbuilding contracts for its Vancouver and Victoria shipyards.

Shipyard workers were jubilant when Seaspan beat the competition for the coveted right to build non-combat ships. Older workers immediately started talking about the opportunities for younger family members.

Labourer Roger Tregidgo, 51, spoke of "hoping, praying" for success, saying he would now encourage his son to join the shipbuilding sector.

About 2,500 direct jobs and 1,500 indirect jobs are anticipated to flow from the work, carried out over many years and with potential to continue if more contracts come through.

Other benefits from these contracts are expected to include college courses, training for apprentices, upgrading and new skills for existing trades, investment in infrastructure and additional business - not only for Seaspan but also for other shipyards and suppliers.

B.C.'s Interior and coastal communities have been battered over decades by the downturn in forestry and fishing industries. Communities were gutted as mills and processing plants closed down and fishing boats disappeared.

When I covered the courthouse years ago in Prince George, countless times, defence lawyers spoke of their clients being laid off from their jobs in the forest industry. Take away jobs and people can lose their way.

On Oct. 19, as I stood on the cold floor of Vancouver Shipyards among all those smiling faces, no one was lost and I saw only hope.

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An \$8-billion win for West Coast; Victoria to reap shipbuilding benefits

An \$8-billion federal contract to build seven non-combat ships, which is expected to create 4,000 jobs, has been awarded to Seaspan Marine Corp., owner of Victoria Shipyards, Vancouver Shipyards and Vancouver Drydock.

"There will be so many spinoffs to so many industries, everybody's going to win. It's a spectacular day for us on the West Coast," said Victoria Shipyards general manager Malcolm Barker.

The federal government announced Wednesday the awarding of \$33 billion in National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy contracts. Nova Scotia's Irving Shipbuilding carried off the grand prize, a \$25-billion package for combat ships, beating bids from Seaspan and Quebec's Davie Yard.

Workers at Victoria Shipyards gathered, wearing their hard hats, to hear the news and cheered when they heard that Seaspan had won some of the work.

During eight years, the project awarded to Seaspan will create 4,000 direct and indirect jobs annually, company officials said.

Seaspan expects about 15 to 20 per cent of the work to take place in Victoria. Ships will be built in Vancouver and come to Victoria for sea trials and finishing.

Premier Christy Clark said she was "absolutely delighted" by the news. "Eight billion is huge," she said. "It is going to be big."

The announcement in Ottawa followed phone calls from a senior public servant to each shipyard.

The mood was tense in Seaspan's head office in North Vancouver. A call came in at 12: 04 p.m. from a federal official giving a five-minute warning for the announcement. All seven Seaspan officials in the room waited, sporadic chatter breaking silences as the minutes dragged on.

"Talk about a watched pot," said Jonathan Whitworth, Seaspan chief executive.

Then the phone rang at 12: 14 p.m. Whitworth picked it up, listened for a few minutes, his face impassive. The others in the room barely breathed.

Finally, Whitworth smiled, and said: "We are extremely happy and proud to be chosen on the non-combat package." He jumped to his feet, shouting, "We won," and danced on the spot, as his colleagues hugged one another.

Whitworth said he did not mind coming second. "Who cares? To win the non-combat is fantastic," he said. "While we felt we were more than capable of building the combat ships, we are honoured to have been chosen to provide the non-combat vessels for the men and women of the Royal Canadian Navy and the coast guard."

Seaspan chairman Kyle Washington said the contract is "sub-stantial, monumental, companychanging, industry-changing."

Initial construction, on a fisheries research vessel, could start late next year, said John Shaw, Seaspan vice-president of program management.

Capturing the non-combat work means that Seaspan will build what will be the pride of the Canadian Coast Guard, the \$720-million John G. Diefenbaker polar ice breaker. The flagship vessel, up to 140 metres long, will play a key role in the government's efforts to establish a stronger presence in the Canadian Arctic.

Also included are two joint support ships for the navy, three fisheries vessels and an oceanographic ship. The government also has plans for more non-combat vessels but hasn't called for bids yet.

Seaspan plans to seek that work. Up to eight Arctic offshore patrol vessels, including four oceanographic science ships and three fisheries science vessels, are planned.

Seaspan said it expects to invest about \$160 million for infrastructure at Vancouver Shipyards and \$30 million at Victoria Shipyards.

At Vancouver Shipyards on Wednesday, several hundred workers burst into a spontaneous hip-hip-hooray at the start of a press conference hosted by Seaspan and attended by Clark.

Whitworth strode up to the podium, waved to the crowd, and said: "Today is living proof that sometimes that scrappy dog really does catch that bumper of that car."

George MacPherson, president of the Shipyard General Workers' Federation, said, "It's a great day.

I can't remember a day like this in the industry and I've been in it a long, long time."

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