

# Fashion firm joins the rebirth of the once booming Port Alberni

## Community wants to move away from being dependent on a single industry

By Derrick Penner, Vancouver Sun March 8, 2011



Michelle Lee, owner of Kloth Clothing Designs Inc., sits in her company's new location in Port Alberni. Photograph by: Quintin Winks

If Michelle Lee had to relocate her fashion-related business from Vancouver to Port Alberni over again, she would do one thing differently.

"I would have maybe not worried about it so much," the young entrepreneur and owner of Kloth Clothing Designs Inc. says laughing while recalling the move.

It has been six months since Lee uprooted Kloth from Gastown, where she saw steady growth over eight years in her business of specialized pattern making, sample construction and manufacturing for the fashion industry.

However, Lee also experienced steadily rising costs of doing business, including commercial real estate rents and the property taxes attached to them.

And her exploration of alternative options lead her on a trail that ended in Port Alberni, the once-booming forestry town now eagerly working on diversifying into an economy with multiple strengths, which welcomed Lee with open arms.

In dispelling her concerns about location, Lee said she found cosy commercial space that is about double the size Kloth occupied in Gastown at about half the cost.

To ease her worries about finding a workforce for her business's specialized tasks, Lee conducted a pre-relocation recruiting drive that drew plenty of eager candidates to select from, whom she is now training.

The logistics of moving materials and finished products to clients is always a concern, but as Lee put it, Port Alberni has "all the same couriers here."

"It has been great, it's been easier than I expected," Lee said. "We did a lot of planning because we anticipated it would be a difficult transition, but things have definitely run quite smoothly."

And Kloth is an example of the businesses the town wants to attract to diversify in directions away from forestry, said Pat Deakin, Port Alberni's economic development manager.

"In the way that we found ourselves really dependent on one industry that has gone through cyclical changes for years, we don't want to diversify into one other sector of the economy," Deakin said in an interview.

Nestled at the head of Alberni Inlet, Port Alberni sits in the middle of Vancouver Island, a way station for travellers on the way to Tofino or Ucluelet on the west coast and the industrial centre for the forestry and fishing industries over a wide area.

Forestry is on a rebound following the recession, Deakin added. All seven of the town's sawmills are operating, though not at full capacity, as timber companies find new markets for their lumber in China, Deakin said.

And the town is looking forward to some further investments by one of the big firms located there, he added.

But there are other developments destined to deliver an economic shot to the surrounding region, with a key aboriginal treaty settlement high on the list of positive impacts.

Deakin noted that on April 11, the five first nations that are signatory to the Maa-Nulth treaty will hold an implementation ceremony, which will unlock cash transfers and resource sharing that will create significant opportunities for their communities.

Beyond that, Deakin said Port Alberni has some specific areas of focus to develop a more diversified economy, from education to agriculture, the marine industry and attracting more retirees.

And tourism is a natural since Port Alberni already draws a considerable number of sports anglers drawn by the town's reputation as a Mecca for salmon fishing, but Deakin added that it has a group of adventure-tour operators looking to draw a more active crowd.

While Port Alberni still does have noticeable unemployment, and a few small businesses that have closed for the lack of successors to take them over, Mike Carter, manager of the Alberni Valley Chamber of Commerce, said he sees reasons for optimism.

The town has just gone through a bit of a building boom, Carter said, with about \$100 million worth of new construction completed or underway. A new \$58-million high school is the biggest part of that, with a new \$13-million facility for BC Hydro in the mix.

But the construction has included some big private-sector projects, such as a new Toyota dealership.

And Carter added that Port Alberni has drawn other design-oriented firms such as Acoustic Woods, a company that makes guitar tops and "ships them by the container load to Asia and Europe."

"Lets put it this way, we're holding our own," Carter said.

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