



# Snaw-Naw-As Market:

Working towards reclaiming  
power and place



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**W**hen you're cruising north on Highway 19 up island from Nanaimo, there's a landmark that's hard to miss. As the sun sets on the deep waters of Nanoose Bay, rays of light slither past towering fir trees, casting shadows on a stunning piece of architecture: the Snaw-Naw-As First Nation's Market.

Designed with the use of 3D modelling, the market features a West Coast look built with heavy timber vestibules and glass, mirroring its natural surrounding area. A project of the Snaw-Naw-As First Nation, also known as the Nanoose First Nation, the marketplace offers a range of services to up to 30,000 motorists passing along the highway every day. You can stop for a gas fill-up at the Shell station or charge your electric car, grab coffee and food at Tim Hortons or at the convenience store, and shop for gifts made by Coast Salish artists.

"It's undeniably the most beautiful car stop on Vancouver

Island," says a motorist visiting the market one rainy day in fall. To the Snaw-Naw-As people, however, the place is more than a hub for motorists: it is a key pillar of the Nation's overall strategy to strengthen their economic future—a step towards self-government and sovereignty. To them, it is how they reclaim their place and power.

"This market is certainly an opportunity for us for development. We have been trying to build that gas station for 30 years," says Brent Edwards, council member of Snaw-Naw-As First Nation and chair of the Nanoose Economic Development Corporation (NEDC), an entity that leads the overall economic development of the Snaw-Naw-As Nation members. The groundwork was laid by the Nation's past leadership, spearheaded by Wilson Bob, David Bob, Wayne Edwards and former chiefs and council members.

"We formed the NEDC to have the right business governance system set up, so we would be attractive to invest in. The

market was designed in such a way that people would want to visit it,” he adds. With its friendly and welcoming vibe, the market won the Commercial Retail Award of Excellence under the 2020 Vancouver Island Real Estate Board (VREB) Commercial Building Awards.

Independently run and Indigenous-led, the store’s proceeds go to the small community of 250 band members, funding their programs and needs like road construction and repairs on the 62-hectare reserve, located a few meters down the hill from the market.

### A day at the market

To Alison Edwards, the Snaw-Naw-As Market’s assistant manager, the project is providing jobs to band members like her. Of the 15 staff members, 11 are from the Snaw-Naw-As First Nation. “Growing up, my grandparents always told me how important it was to go out there, to get educated, then to come home and bring it all back to the community. This is what pushed me to get involved in the business,” she says, adding that her current role is much bigger than her coffee barista experience elsewhere.

She and the other staff members get a lot of support from Doug Tombe, the General Manager who brings in 30 years of experience in the gas industry. Their typical day at the market starts with a steady stream of customers and gets busy at 10 a.m. all the way till 5 p.m., with one last rush in the evening before closing. Tombe says he had to train the entire staff from scratch, as most of the workers had no prior gas station and convenience store experience when the store opened in June 2019.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, business slowed down for a few months. The market lost a few staff members who were uncomfortable interacting with the public. “There was a lot of anxiety from the community about infecting people on the reserve. But that never happened; no one got sick of COVID,” Tombe says, adding that business soon picked up and profits grew during the pandemic.

One factor for that is the market’s strategic location. When one approaches the highway intersection at Lantzville,



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the Snaw-Naw-As Market sign is immediately spotted. Below it is a huge orange sign bearing the words “Every Child Matters.” Turning right onto the station, there are parking slots marked for Elders and a wide-open space for cars to line up for gas. As you approach the convenience store, Coast Salish artist LessLIE Sam’s artwork on the glass walls stands out, and behind that is the Indigenous gift department, a unique feature of the market.

Each section of the gift store is carefully curated, featuring a range of products from accessories, colouring books, and blankets, to socks and mugs, coasters and pins. Racks of orange shirts designed by local Indigenous artists draw much attention from visitors. One popular shirt bears the translation of “Every Child Matters” in Hul’qu’mi’num, the ancestral language of the Snaw-Naw-As people: “MUKW SMUN’EEM ‘O’TLP”.

### **A shared future for our children**

Seeking resources to revitalize their language and culture is only one of the many reasons why the Nanoose First Nation is seeking self-sufficiency. “There’s more to the market than just selling gas and merchandise. Our Elders have always told us the children are the future. The work that we do today is for them,” says NEDC board member Amanda Bob, who as a child remembers being in rooms where her Elders would talk about building a strong future for the children.

As the manager of the daycare centre in their community, Bob collaborates with the market managers for events on the reserve. On National Truth and Reconciliation Day on September 30th, for example, the market donated the orange shirts for the children in the daycare to wear.







**(top left)** Snaw-naw-as General Manager Doug Tombe; **(bottom)** Snaw-naw-as Guest Service Specialist Rick Bob; **(top right)** Snaw-naw-as Assistant Manager Alison (Ali) Edwards.

“Wearing those shirts and having those signs up at the market is a way to support families impacted by the residential school system. They create spaces for discussion, starting with the 215 unmarked gravesites of children buried in the former site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School,” Bob shares. Her own family has been deeply impacted by the residential schools, which were established by the government in the 1800s to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture. The system that went on till the late 1990s is widely considered a form of genocide, with some 4,000 to 6,000 children reported to have died while in school. Accounts of horrendous physical and sexual abuse have been made public through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report in 2015. Bob’s grandfather had a brother and sister who had been taken to the Indian Residential School in Port Alberni, a city one hour away from Nanoose. “They never came home,” Bob says. “Now that gravesites are being recovered, my family might be able to bring them home and give them a proper resting place.”

### Reclaiming power and place

To Bob and other members of the Nation, nurturing courage and resilience in the younger generations is a crucial step towards reconciliation—starting with reclaiming their identity and place. The Snaw-Naw-As Nation stands on unceded land and are former signatories of the Douglas Treaties, known as the Vancouver Island Treaties covering Indigenous territories in Victoria, Saanich, Sooke, Nanaimo and Port Hardy, all signed in the 1850s. The Nation and other First Nations in the surrounding areas are now in the final stages of negotiating the Te’mexw Treaty, which will allow the Snaw-Naw-As people to pursue new economic development opportunities as an independent and self-governing Nation.

The market blazes the trail towards that vision. “It certainly is the biggest project under the economic plan right now,” Brent Edwards says. “Everybody in our community benefits when we are successful with our business ventures.”



“Despite over 150 years of colonial pressure to assimilate, our people have built a healthy community government and a sustainable economic industry to provide opportunities for our people. We have continued to practice and pass on our ancestral knowledge and ways,” their band website reads. Keeping traditions alive includes promoting the work of the artists from the community, as their designs, used for places like the market, are handed from one generation to another. “It’s carrying on with our cultural way of life,” Bob adds.

The influence of the project is far-reaching. With a visibly impressive place of business that’s Indigenous-owned and led, the market draws attention to the issues and challenges Indigenous peoples face today. And while the store is not meant to be a hub for these discussions, it awakens the sense of curiosity and responsibility to know and learn more about Indigenous peoples on the island—whether it begins with questions such as how to pronounce “Snaw-Naw-As” or who they are as a people and what their story is.

“The gas station is really a place of business. But the Coast Salish people are a friendly people, and so for folks looking to learn about us, talking to us is a good start,” offers Edwards. •