

# *Mercer Once Again Serving in Leadership Role for His Indigenous Village In British Columbia*

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Sii T'ax Development  
Corporation's Bert Mercer

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Bert Mercer is once again calling many of the shots for the Sii T'ax Development Corporation. Founded in 2002, Sii T'ax is the longest-operating development corporation in the Nisga'a Nation. Mercer initially served as the general manager and CEO for the corporation, which is the business arm of the Gitlaxt'aamiks (previously New Aiyansh) village government in British Columbia, from the summer of 2002 until early 2006. He resumed working for his village as their business manager this past December.

However, it took a lot of work to reach this point. Mercer graduated from British Columbia's Simon Fraser University's community economic development program in 2011. Two years later, he took a course called Project Management for Professionals through the University of Northern British Columbia, a short but intensive 10-month program. "There was a really broad sector of people that took it, from different industries," Mercer said. "It really helped me move forward in what I'm doing." Mercer

supplemented this academic knowledge with his extensive real-world experience. Besides helping launch the Sii T'ax Development Corporation, Mercer spent almost eight years during the 90s as Gitlaxt'aamiks' economic development and employment officer, preparing funding proposals and acting as a business advisory liaison to entrepreneurs. He then spent two years as the village administrator overseeing corporate, economic, and community development, as well as capital and housing division budgets totaling more than 6.5 million dollars. During his time as village administrator, Mercer's accomplishments included implementing and finalizing the construction of 65 residential lots, as well as paving the roads, parking lots, and residential driveways for the village. He also developed and implemented an on-reserve mortgage program. Finally, before becoming the CEO of Sii T'ax Development Corporation, Mercer also spent 18 months working as the project's coordinator for his village.

In between his Gitlaxt'aamiks stints, Mercer worked for the Nisga'a Lisims government as its economic development officer. Nisga'a Lisims contains the capital of Gitlaxt'aamiks and three other villages: Gingolx, Gitwinksihlkw, and Laxgalts'ap. "When I was working at the Nisga'a Lisims government, I really didn't like it after a while because there's too many silos," Mercer said. "There were some internal roadblocks. I didn't like that. So, at least working for my own village, I can actually start building now."

Indeed, Mercer is a happy camper these days, spearheading numerous business projects for his relatively small village (population 1,400). "It's good," he said of his current employment environment. "Everybody works together in the office." And, thanks in large part to Mercer's leadership, the Sii T'ax Development Corporation now has a real purpose. Its goals include:

- generating revenue to reinvest into community development opportunities supporting the health and prosperity of Gitlaxt'aamiks and the Nisga'a Nation;
- creating capacity building opportunities regarding employment and career progression for Nisga'a citizens;
- supporting the development of Nisga'a business capacity, including business startup and growth;
- building strong partnerships that align with the corporation's purpose of supporting capacity building and revenue generation; and
- identifying and implementing legacy opportunities for the village and Nation resulting from industrial and other projects.

Mercer is also pleased to see that officials from his village are willing to spend money to advance its business initiatives. This past fall, his Nation hired an economic development officer, an economic development industry resource officer, and a business manager (the position Mercer currently holds). Mercer is confident that Gitlaxt'aamiks is now in a much better position to work on its initiatives. "They had a finance person before," he noted. "But they didn't have a business manager that could look outside for other projects."

Mercer now has numerous ambitious plans for his village—and not just within the community. For starters, the village will have a new mechanic’s shop that is expected to open in 2024 and a 20-room motel expected to be open for business by 2025. Mercer is pleased with the freedom he has over these projects. “The greatest satisfaction is that it allows me to open up areas where the village hasn’t opened up yet and start developing just within the village,” he said. “And the other part too that I’m excited about is what is called The Gathering Place. It’s a two-level building that will allow the entrepreneurs to utilize the bottom level. And then the second level would be the leasing out of business offices.” As for existing businesses in the village, Mercer said he is especially proud to see that the local gas bar and convenience store are thriving. “I’m most proud of that because I was part of that years and years ago,” Mercer said. “I was the one that expanded it from 4,000 to 6,000 square feet. It opened in the late 70s, ran as a co-op and then it got expanded.”

Mercer is also pleased his village received its share of funding for local projects. “Our village got gaming funds of \$2.9 million from B.C. Gaming,” he noted. “They are divvying up gaming funds to all of the First Nations in B.C.” Mercer said village representatives set aside approximately one million dollars towards the construction of the new motel. And \$250,000 will go towards covering expenses for launching the mechanic’s shop. “It came through our Nisga’a Lisims government but it took them two years to send the money down to the village,” Mercer added of the provincial money received. “Without that, we would have had to look at other sources of funding.” Mercer said village officials will also be relying on outside funding for The Gathering Place, expected to open in 2025. “We still have to do the design work,” Mercer explained. “We’re applying to the Rural Economic Diversification and Infrastructure program through the Ministry of Jobs, Economic Development and Innovation through the B.C. provincial government. We’re looking to get \$100,000 from that so we can get our designs done for this year. Then we’ll plan it out properly. And then we’ll apply for up to \$1 million through the program.”

Mercer expects numerous local artists to benefit when The Gathering Place officially opens. Though design plans have yet to be finalized, Mercer has an inkling of what the centre will look like. “There will be some dividers on the lower level,” he confirmed. “But entrepreneurs like to interact. The rationale behind The Gathering Place was to showcase our artisans because they are all home based. When visitors and tourists are coming up here, they’re looking to spend some money but the [artisans] are home based right now so they can’t do that.” Indeed, Mercer is confident that visitors are keen to come to Nisga’a Nation. “We’ve got a lot of people that are coming up here,” Mercer said of tourists. “When I talked to Terrace Tourism, they told me about 80-85 percent of tourists that have visited their office are asking where is Nisga’a Nation and how do we get there.” (Gitlaxt’aamiks is located 100 kilometres northwest of Terrace, B.C.).

Mercer is also hoping his village will be able to announce some significant initiatives in the near future. “For the partnerships that we are putting together, we can bid on projects outside of the village,” he said, adding some of those opportunities are in the mining sector. “I recognize that Sii T’ax Development Corporation was kind of

really quiet for the longest time because they didn't have [a business manager] in there. But there are some good opportunities coming up in mining and exploration." And, looking beyond Gitlaxt'aamiks, Mercer believes that all four Nisga'a villages can take advantage of new potential partnerships. "It's kind of opened up for us up here now because our Nisga'a lands are 26,000 square kilometres," he said. "It goes all the way up north and it buffers up to the Tahltan Nation. And then on the other side of us is the Gitxsan Nation. The boundary runs right along the Alaska border. There are more and more opportunities coming up in the gold mine sector because we're part of the Golden Triangle for the north." However, while some of the mining and exploration projects being considered are quite lucrative, Mercer is doing his best to ensure that these partnerships are meaningful for his village's citizens: "In a lot of ways, industry will go into some areas but they won't partner with them. A lot of times they bring in their own people. That's what we're doing up here. We're trying to say if jobs are available, our own people can access them."

Considering Mercer's commitment to his community and his work background, it's little surprise that people are approaching him for advice. "I'm pretty open to them," he said. "We get a lot of emails from outside companies because outside companies are looking to partner with a Nisga'a corporation or a Nisga'a entrepreneur to try to get their foot in the door on some of the projects that are coming up." Whether it is handing out advice or dealing with projects connected to his own village, Mercer noted several key issues connected with Indigenous economic development today. For starters, he said it is vital to be transparent and have "open discussions with whichever community or band you're from and then have public meetings so you can have that support. Some of the areas they have problems with are elected officials that interfere." While Gitlaxt'aamiks is fortunate to receive outside funding to advance its initiatives, others are not: "If you look at the smaller bands, for their economic development budgets, they don't get that much because it's all based on per capita," Mercer said.

Relatedly, Mercer is hoping some of Nisga'a's youngest members take advantage of opportunities that will allow them to stay close to home. "The one thing we're trying to do is bring in industry to highlight what type of careers are available in the industry so that the young ones can go to school for that and hopefully come back and work in the industry," Mercer said. "A lot of it is camp work but it's good money." He goes on to note that "Our population is about 8,000 but only about 35 percent live in the four Nisga'a villages. All the rest live in Vancouver, Prince Rupert and Terrace. We have a huge opportunity now. We had one community workshop already [in February] and we have a two-day one coming up in May." And this October, the village will host a Bears' Den for youth aged 18-35 where they can pitch their businesses.

Mercer said he understands why many Nisga'a families have moved out of the village to larger centres. "It's all because of the school system and also for their kids to get better opportunities in recreation for things like swimming or gymnastics," he said. "I think as we move forward, when [the villages] hire their teachers, they need someone that can teach something like gymnastics or soccer or basketball to the kids, rather than just having them go out to the playground." Another key issue that drives Nisga'a residents away is not having a decent place to live in the villages. "Housing is the other

impact,” Mercer acknowledged. “There is a lack of housing. One thing that needs to be done is they need to build more apartment blocks for the younger generation. Through our village government, through our CEO, they are looking at tiny homes. They are already doing that. But the one thing we want to look more at is the apartment blocks.” Mercer believes about one hundred people can easily be housed in units consisting of one to three bedrooms. “We’ve got the budget for it,” Mercer said of the ability of Gitlaxt’aamiks to start constructing a pair of apartment blocks by 2025.

Indeed, Mercer has a dream of what his village will eventually look like. “We want to leapfrog and put all these projects together,” he said. “Our vision for the village is to build a downtown corridor. I think the way things are going right now, maybe that will take three years. Everything is all in place. But they just need to get proper architectural designs of the facilities that we’re looking at.” But this is just one part of the vision Mercer is hoping to fulfill. “I have a plan of action of what we want to do,” he said. “We’re trying to maximize on the local economy and we’re going to maximize on long-term sustainable employment and capacity building.” And he senses there are plenty of positive vibes around the village these days. “I think it’s good,” he said. “We have a lot of happy people that feel we’ve got a chain of people that will be doing stuff for them.”