

# *Economic Self-Determination in Action: Sii T'ax Development Corporation's Achievements as an Independent Economic Development Corporation*

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## **A New Chapter: Nisga'a Economic Self-Determination**

April 1, 2025, signalled a pivotal shift in the economic trajectory of the Gitlaxt'aamiks community and the wider Nisga'a Nation. On this day, the Sii T'ax Development Corporation (STDC) emerged as the independent economic arm of the Gitlaxt'aamiks Village Government (GVG) (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). This transition formally designates STDC as the independent economic entity of GVG while granting it the freedom to pursue business development, forge new partnerships, and drive employment initiatives with greater autonomy. As Bert Mercer (STDC's business manager) explains, STDC became the independent economic arm of GVG due to Nisga'a Treaty requirements: under the Nisga'a Final Agreements framework, business and economic development are no longer carried out under GVG, whose primary mandate is governance. Instead, economic development is carried out at arm's length from the Village Government to avoid creating liability for the Nation. And while Nisga'a's four villages already had their own economic development officers, the Nisga'a Final Agreement formalizes the requirement that business and economic development be managed by independent development corporations. This piece examines how this transition created new pathways towards greater community prosperity, capacity-building, and cross-Nation collaborations, rooted in Nisga'a values.

## **Historical Foundations: Nisga’a Final Agreement, Treaty Rights, and Economic Transformation**

Nisga’a Nation is the first Nation in British Columbia to sign a modern treaty. The Nisga’a Final Agreement was ratified on May 11th, 2000, the culmination of 113 years of steadfast advocacy and resiliency while the Nation pursued recognition from the provincial and federal governments. In recognition of the 113-year struggle, the main roadway connecting the Four Nisga’a Villages was later named Highway 113. The Treaty initiated a new phase of self-governance and created economic development opportunities for the Nation, largely as a result of agreement provisions that limited the Indian Act’s authority over the Nation’s internal affairs (Nisga’a Lisims Government, n.d.). Per capita dollars were no longer restricted by the former Department of Indian Affairs, and federal and provincial funding allowed for greater access to revenue. The Treaty granted the Nation full ownership of approximately 2,000 km<sup>2</sup> of traditional Nisga’a land (Nisga’a Lisims Government, n.d.), along with the authority to enact bylaws and regulations: this created jobs, such as bylaw enforcement officers, paid through the Nisga’a Lisims Government.

Right after the Treaty took effect, economic development was still closely tied to the Village Government (GVG) while things were in a transition period, and the Nation was getting the new structures up and running. Decisions about when to create a separate development corporation (and what sits under government versus at arm’s length) took time; they were shaped by relationships, roles, and where people felt responsibility and recognition should sit. It took time to get clarity and consensus before establishing a separate development corporation.

## **The Early Days: The Initial Role of Sii T’ax Development Corporation**

While the Treaty benefited the Nation, GVG did not have an official Development Corporation until 2002. In the beginning, the STDC had a board of seven directors, who were tasked with managing Gitlaxt’aamiks Villages’ housing corporation and cable TV services. Bert Mercer explains how this led to improved infrastructure, as “through GVG, there was a huge increase in housing development; though we were using outside contractors ... lots in the village filled up and expansion became necessary over time. House quality improved and as of today, we need to further expand” (personal communication, April 2025). Economic development also increased because “the Nation could negotiate Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs) with the mining sector” (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025), which was not possible before the Treaty due to the need for government approval. Mercer also notes that the Nation’s Fish and Wildlife capacity improved after the Treaty was signed, and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) “interfered less with us than with non-treaty Nations” (personal communication, April 2025).

## **Treaty Impacts: Economic and Local Capacity Growth**

A great present-day example of this economic improvement lies within STDC's involvement with Nisga'a Lisims Government Fish and Wildlife Committee. This year's successful Nisga'a Commercial Inland Fishing Program saw fishers from the four Nisga'a Villages of Gitlaxt'aamiks, Gingolx, Laxgaltsap, and Gitwinksihlkw gather on the Nass River. The program's six two-day openings in July and August of 2025 generated \$476,408 through its partner Aerotrading: of that amount, \$395,308 was paid to the fishermen from the four Nisga'a Villages, with the program earning \$80,000 in profit. Mercer successfully oversaw Gitlaxt'aamiks Village's portion of the program, alongside GVG's Economic Development Officer, and notes, "It didn't just generate money, it generated employment and not only that, but a huge revenue stream for people within the Fish and Wildlife industry as well as community wealth" (personal communication, April 2025).

## **The 2025 Transition: STDC's Move to Operational Independence**

This history culminated in the resolution for STDC to become the independent economic arm of GVG. The January 20, 2025, ratification granted STDC complete economic and operational autonomy from GVG: STDC now handles its own HR, financial, and operational oversight. And while STDC still reports to GVG as its majority shareholder, the development corporation's redefined liability and governance allow it to pursue business opportunities within a much shorter and more flexible decision-making window, no longer having to schedule around GVG's already busy agenda.

The benefits of this arrangement speak for themselves. Granting STDC the commercial agility needed for rapid strategic financial actions has allowed them to forge partnerships that reflect community priorities—all while preserving a collaborative, good faith rapport with GVG (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). STDC's more nimble and responsive decision-making process has resulted in shortened project-approval timelines, streamlined employee onboarding, and more efficient resource allocation (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). STDC now operates at a speed and structure that has proven to be highly successful, sparking local jobs and talent, generating an operational surplus, and revitalizing the Gitlaxt'aamiks economy.

## **Building Partnerships: Governance Realignment and Shareholder Structure**

The shift from oversight by GVG to an independent economic arm signals the dawn of a transformative era for STDC—but at the heart of this achievement is the push to keep a strong, transparent, and cross-functional relationship with GVG. This important partnership ensures that strategic choices, long-term planning, and overall accountability remain intact while STDC navigates its new operational independence. STDC's commitment to transparent communication, joint planning efforts, and quarterly reporting structures reflects its belief that economic and operational independence is

not a sign of separation but a means of strengthening its capacity to work alongside the Village Government in a complementary, mutually supportive partnership.

The STDC transition provides a model that other Nations can follow when shifting from Nation-run operations toward independent, community-driven economic ventures. STDC's journey to independence has provided a rich toolbox of lessons, from how to craft governance structures, reconcile autonomy with accountability, strengthen workforce capacity, harness both local and regional partnerships, and weave sustainable practices into the very fabric of everyday business. And by emphasizing collaboration, transparency, and shared objectives, STDC shows that First Nations and Indigenous organizations can pursue economic development while maintaining cooperative partnerships with the Nation's government, a model that can motivate, educate, and guide other communities walking a similar path.

### **Early Outcomes: Jobs, Surplus, and Revitalized Local Enterprises**

Since the post-transition period, STDC has revitalized several cornerstone community enterprises such as the Lava Roc Restaurant, the Lava Roc gift shop, and the New Aiyansh Gas Bar/Convenience Store (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). Each of these operations now reports a surplus, or, as Mercer puts it, each of these are "in the black," a testament to exemplary fiscal stewardship and effective local management. Operational choices have been purposefully and strategically linked to the community's long-term goals. STDC's partnership with Sysco for the Lava Roc Restaurant and New Aiyansh Gas Bar has ironed out the restaurant's supply chain, ensuring a steady flow of quality fare. Meanwhile, the kitchen tucked behind the gas bar has become a local hotspot, generating steady employment and meeting the community's food-access needs: Mercer has brought in local entrepreneurs to make bread and baked goods, which are popular among the community and often sell out daily at the gas bar kitchen (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). These businesses are examples of how STDC is stepping up to support Nisga'a-owned businesses and support Indigenous employment.

Ultimately, STDC's economic and operational independence translates into capacity-building for Gitlaxt'aamiks and the Nisga'a Nation by uplifting local entrepreneurs. The corporation places a clear focus on employing Nisga'a citizens, and when a role can't be filled locally, STDC reaches out to partner with other First Nations or Indigenous businesses, pursuing Indigenous procurement and job creation and strengthening broader Indigenous economic collaboration (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). Likewise, STDC runs on the Ksi Lisims direct-award model, deliberately steering clear of the textbook Request for Proposal/Request for Quotation (RFP/RFQ) process and instead awarding contracts to partners whose operations and philosophies align with local values and the distinct economic priorities of STDC. Across British Columbia, the Direct Award model is gathering momentum as First Nations and Indigenous governments work to strengthen and renew authority over activities established on the land. This specific model hands STDC the power and freedom to advance employment targets, safeguard the environment, and select

contractors and partners whose practices correspond with treaty rights. It allows the Nation to set the rules of the partnership instead of being forced to fit into an external procurement system. Choosing the Ksi Lisims direct-award model demonstrates how structural independence can ensure that the next chapter of economic development is managed by Indigenous communities and that their chosen partners support Indigenous aspirations.

## **Workforce Development: Mentorship and Indigenous Employment Pathways**

Another initiative is STDC's partnership with Wildlife Protection Solutions (WPS). STDC has forged a path for Nisga'a and Gitlaxt'aamiks Village community members to secure certification as wildlife monitors. WPS provides an apprenticeship-style training program, anchored in insights into animal behaviours, meticulous environmental risk assessment, and the strategic use of nonlethal deterrence tactics (J. Roscher, personal communication, April 2025). Guided by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with STDC, the program delineates three pathways: training, staffing, and mentorship. Participants are paired with highly experienced wildlife monitors, which enables them to grow confidence and advance their expertise through real-world experiences. The ultimate goal is to strengthen participants' environmental and ethical awareness, equip them with transferable skills, and prepare them to assume invaluable roles within projects.

STDC is currently exploring a longer-term partnership with WPS to construct a wildlife-safety policy for the Nisga'a Nation. This initiative would mark a shift from a reactive stance to proactive wildlife management and allows for further local employment opportunities, all while strengthening land stewardship. WPS will provide wildlife-monitoring training for up to 12 Nisga'a members, specifically those who reside in Gitlaxt'aamiks Village/New Aiyansh. As Jessica Roscher, the owner of WPS, explains, by joining together, STDC and GVG can champion a cutting-edge policy that draws on Indigenous knowledge and corresponds with the practicalities of today's industrial world (personal communication, April 2025). STDC is also working to build mentorship structures situated inside the organization. With STDC's guidance, staff members at the Lava Roc Restaurant and the New Aiyansh gas bar are acquiring trade skills and amplifying their business instincts, setting them up for future management roles or other entrepreneurial ventures. This all-encompassing approach means workforce development is woven into every facet of STDC's operations and philosophy.

Looking ahead, STDC is moving to strengthen workforce development partnerships with regional colleges and to roll out apprenticeship pathways in trades such as mechanics, logistics, and welding—fields that are currently in high demand due to STDC's aggregate and energy projects. Mercer emphasizes that training isn't a one-off obligation; it's a worthy investment in community (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). The aim of these longer-term plans is to grow a pipeline of talent that is grounded in community. Placing workforce development partnerships and mentorship models at the forefront, STDC is sowing the seeds of Indigenous leadership and business

acumen. From youth to Elders, Nisga'a citizens are being trained with fresh sets of skills, creating clear pathways to careers and allowing for a strong voice in steering the economic future of the Nisga'a Nation.

### **Sustainable Development and Energy Innovation: A Zero-Emission Future**

Sustainability is a pillar of STDC's long-term vision. Having moved beyond GVG oversight, STDC has the power to secure energy solutions while cutting through red tape and fostering industry partnerships. Take the New Aiyansh gas bar, for example: as of April 1st, 2025, the gas bar has been dispensing a canola-oil-derived fuel that slashes greenhouse gas emissions and carries a minimal environmental impact. STDC is also exploring floating liquified natural gas (LNG) technologies that support economic development ambitions and environmental caretaking (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). And by taking part in forums via the Nisga'a Industry Relations Office, STDC is on the lookout for new and sustainable energy innovations, safeguarding the Nation's ambition to participate in the consistently shifting clean-energy economy. With that freedom, STDC can now chart its course in researching, piloting, and deploying energy technologies that better align with Indigenous values while accounting for boots-on-the-ground geographic constraints and the region's economic possibilities.

### **Strategic Partnerships: Building Capacity Through Joint Ventures and Direct-Award Models**

The partnership between Stromsten C&C and STDC signals an advance in boosting local infrastructure and aggregate capacity. Operating out of the Grease Trail gravel quarry, the venture is slated to produce 10,000 cubic meters of gravel each year, with the option to scale up if provincial permits allow. The quarry's activity is also driving up the demand for a suite of supporting trades such as welders, mechanics, and logistics providers. This ripple effect increases the project's footprint and significantly improves the community's cross-sector capacity.

Supported by resolutions from both GVG and Wilp Si'ayuukhl Nisga'a (WSN), the venture embeds training opportunities into its core philosophy. The owner and operator of Stromsten C&C, Matt Stromsten, is committed to mentoring Nisga'a employees on quarry operations, safety practices, and heavy-equipment handling, laying the groundwork for transferring ownership to the community (personal communication, April 2025). The initiative works alongside STDC's economic development and self-sufficiency objectives via multiyear contracts (including those linked to the Ksi Lisims LNG project) that provide community members with the opportunity to obtain trucks, secure commercial-driving certification, and operate as subcontractors: this is a crucial step towards supporting local entrepreneurs and small enterprises.



## **Lessons for Other Nations: A Replicable Model of Indigenous-Led Economic Development**

STDC's evolution from a government-run venture into a community-guided economic development corporation highlights how granting autonomy, when balanced with joint oversight, can enhance local capacity, nurture economic growth, and allow the development corporation the freedom to act in alignment with community priorities. The cornerstone of any effort to mirror this transition is securing economic and operational independence. Nations must formally untether the development corporation from the government and transparently lay out its activities for shareholders. Formal agreements and adherence to Indigenous-governance and financial regulations is indispensable for ensuring accountability, building credibility amongst shareholders, and safeguarding operational integrity.

Equally crucial is preserving a constructive collaboration with the governmental body or majority shareholder. Regular dialogue, open and transparent reporting, and co-planned workshops help ensure that independence complements government oversight rather than replacing it. By aligning their goals with long-term community prosperity, Nations can foster a partnership dynamic with independent economic development corporations in which self-sufficiency and accountability thrive together.

Effective governance structures must also juggle community representation with professional expertise. Involving community members helps to ensure that choices reflect the community's priorities and values, while technical specialists, such as lawyers, HR specialists, and business consultants, contribute to the operational and financial expertise needed. When decision-making authority is clearly defined and accountability mechanisms are in place, the delicate balance between independence and oversight can be maintained.

## **Conclusion: A Viable Path Towards Self-Directed Growth**

STDC's hiring model and focus on mentorship and training allow for successful routes to leadership and entrepreneurial ventures within the Nation. By interlacing skill development across every department and forging apprentice partnerships in highly coveted trades such as logistics, mechanics, and environmental management, STDC cultivates a workforce that is both locally skilled and resilient. Direct awards or Nation-specific procurement frameworks serve as levers for economic self-determination. Steering contracts toward Indigenous-owned businesses that support community priorities catalyzes capacity-building and hands-on training, while planting the seeds of opportunity. In this way, procurement practices advance long-term social objectives while uplifting the local business ecosystem. Incremental collaborations and purpose-driven capital can reinforce credibility while supporting expansion. By joining together with businesses in joint venture partnerships, pathways emerge to cultivate local expertise, exchange knowledge, and anchor investments in long-term community priorities from infrastructure to energy and economic diversification; this helps guarantee that the resulting growth lifts the entire Nation as a whole. Integrating environmental priorities into decision-making is just as crucial. Weaving a commitment

to environmental stewardship and traditional knowledge into everyday operations helps ensure that growth stays true to community principles. Autonomy then enables Nations to trial their initiatives more efficiently, while still aligning their shared oversight and long-term vision.

At the end of the day, writing down and noting what has been learned, as well as taking a moment to mull over those insights, is what keeps the wheels turning toward improvement and lasting achievement. Cataloguing both wins and stumbling blocks builds a platform for sound governance, capacity-enhancement, and economic progress: this illustrates that a firm sense of operational independence can go hand-in-hand with cooperative partnerships with village governments. By putting collaboration, transparency, and common goals at the forefront, Nations can create a path toward self-directed growth while protecting cultural roots, enacting good governance, and supporting emerging capacity within their communities.

## REFERENCES

Nisga'a Lisims Government. (n.d.) *Nisga'a Treaty*. <https://www.nisgaanation.ca/government/nisgaa-treaty/>