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LOCAL NEWS

## Aspen Planers negotiating with Steelworkers

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Aspen Planers, owner of Ainsworth Lumber's defunct specialty plywood operations in Lillooet and Savona, will begin negotiations this week with the United Steelworkers.

The president of Aspen Planers, David Gray, spoke last Thursday to the Lillooet Chamber of Commerce at the District of Lillooet municipal hall.

According to Gray, he will meet with Marty Gibbons, president of United Steelworkers Local 1-417.

The workers at Ainsworth's former plants in Lillooet and Savona, about 250 in total, belong to Local 1-417. The Lillooet veneer plant alone employed about 100 people.

Aspen Planers employees at its main operations and headquarters in Merritt are also members of Local 1-417. The company also has mills and timber on the Pacific Coast, in Lytton, and in Princeton.

At the chamber of commerce, Gray repeated the company's goal of reducing the specialty plywood operations' costs, including labour, by 20 per cent.

He indicated Ainsworth was unable to keep the plants open because their costs were too high.

"They sold it because it was under water significantly."

In addition to cutting costs, Aspen Planers hopes to make the Lillooet and Savona plants profitable by processing more than one type of wood product there.

"It doesn't work if you're going to be a one-trick pony."

Gray predicted a rocky road ahead for the negotiations, which will determine the terms under which the union members would return to work.

"I don't expect that we'll be doing high-fives at the end of the day."

At the same time, Aspen Planers will have to reach deals with its landlords, the T'it'q'et and Sek'wel'was (Cayoose Creek) St'at'imc bands, and the provincial government.

Gray said that if the company can secure agreements with its landlords and the Steelworkers, it would still take at least one and a half months of preparation before the plants could reopen.

"It's going to be a long road back."

He added that reopening the plant would be a gradual process, starting with one shift of workers and hopefully adding more over time.

Still, Gray expressed optimism that negotiations with all parties would ultimately be fruitful.

“We believe the outcome will be positive for the community.

“We’re doing it to make a sustainable, long-term business.”

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