

# Businessman closes deal for empty B.C. town

Abandoned site in remarkable condition, new owner says

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Krishnan Suthanthiran took one look at a photograph of Kitsault, B.C., and knew he had to buy it.

Mr. Suthanthiran, an American businessman, was attending a cancer conference in Halifax last September when he read an article in *The Globe and Mail* that the abandoned mining town had been put up for sale for \$7-million. He immediately called the real estate agent, Rudy Nielsen.

"I called him first thing, 9 a.m. Vancouver time. I would have been the first caller," Mr. Suthanthiran said yesterday.

Mr. Suthanthiran, 55, who attended Carleton University in Ottawa, says he has always been in love with Canada, and British Columbia in particular, and Kitsault was just too good to pass up.

After months of negotiations he finalized the deal yesterday for an undisclosed price.

He's heading to Kitsault, about 140 kilometres northeast of Prince Rupert, next month to start planning its future.

"We want to get the community involved," he said excitedly. "Our goal is to create a very vibrant economy there and we are looking to a number of ideas." Those ideas include turning the town into a movie studio, creating a resort, and working with Canadian universities to establish an environmental research facility.

"Whatever we do, we want to make sure that it's good for everyone."

At first blush, Mr. Suthanthiran appears to be an unlikely owner of an empty town that stretches over 130 hectares and includes a 2,045-square-metre shopping centre, two recreation centres, 92 houses, seven apartment buildings, an equipped hospital and 80 hectares of wilderness all overlooking the coastal mountains.

Born in India, Mr. Suthanthiran came to Canada in 1969 to earn a master's degree in engineering at Carleton. He graduated in 1971 and spent a few months working at the university and for the National Research Council. But his dream was to become a doctor and he enrolled in some premed courses at the University of Toronto.

"My father died of rectal cancer and I wanted to work in the medical field and I really wanted to work in cancer research," he said.

However, his dream died during biology class. "I was a vegetarian at that time and I couldn't dissect a frog. That was a little too much."

He decided to earn a doctorate in engineering instead and was about to start at the University of Waterloo when a summer trip to Washington landed him a job working for an oncologist. "He was looking for an engineer to work in cancer research and that's exactly what I was looking for."

Mr. Suthanthiran remained in Washington, became a U.S. citizen and eventually started his own

company, Best Medical International, which specializes in products for radiation therapy and recently expanded into Europe. He also dabbled in real estate.

His ties to Canada remained strong. He makes annual donations to Carleton and has set up an endowment at the university. "I like going to Canada more than Europe because of the short distance and you speak the language and you can drink the water and you can eat the food," he said. "Canada has always been exciting for me."

Kitsault will be his largest real estate venture and his first holding in Canada.

He and his partner, Shawn Weingast, have been surprised at the condition of the town, which once boasted 1,200 residents.

Kitsault was built in the early 1980s by Amax Canada Development which was hoping to mine the area's vast deposits of molybdenum, an additive used in steel production.

Amax spent about \$50-million on the town site but the molybdenum market went into a tailspin and in November of 1982 the company shut down the mine. It never reopened and within a year the town was empty. Amax ended up in the hands of U.S. copper giant Phelps Dodge Corp., which put Kitsault up for sale last fall.

"When I heard that the property had been abandoned for 20 years, I was expecting the worst," Mr. Weingast said. "But it is in remarkable condition." He said most of the roofs on the houses are intact and the road in from Terrace, about four hours away by car, is in good shape.

Mr. Suthanthiran said he is determined to create something unique in the town and generate jobs for people in the area. "Life is full of opportunities and you can make use of it, you can kick it or [you] can walk away from it. I think our goal is to make use of this opportunity to create something."

He added that the project means even more to him personally. "I have a great sense of gratitude for the opportunity that I had for education in Canada and I feel that it's my turn to go back and give something back to Canada," he said.

"None of us live forever. We don't take anything with us when we die and we didn't bring anything with us. Ultimately what truly signifies us is the contribution we make to the society."