

Consul General hits hard issues

By Colleen Dane

Record Staff Writer

There was no skirting of the big issues by United States Consul General to Vancouver Lewis Lukens when he visited the Comox Valley this week.

When he made a presentation Tuesday in front of roughly 25 people involved in organizations that connect businesses on the Island, Lukens started by hitting on softwood lumber, new passport requirements and cross-border crime.

It's a head-on approach that he takes, he said, largely to let those he meets understand where he's coming from — especially as he continues to make connections across the province a year into his tenure on the Lower Mainland.

"It's a huge relationship and it's a relationship where we clearly both need each other," said Lukens to the group gathered over a lunch meeting, about the trade scale between the two

UNITED STATES

countries.

For the record, Lukens called the settlement on softwood proof that "good friends can resolve their differences," that the new passport requirement is viewed by the U.S. government as an important safety measure but that they're doing their best to make it easy on those legitimate travelers, and that both sides need to, and are, working together to protect the world's largest unprotected border.

The visit this week was Lukens' first to the mid-Island. On Tuesday he was starting with the lunch and then following it with visits to a few local businesses. On Wednesday he was going to Nanaimo for the same type of event.

Also visiting was commercial specialist from the U.S. Consulate Cheryl Schell — a Canadian whose job for 18 years has been

helping to connect American businesses with those north of the border.

Organized through the Comox Valley's Economic Development Office, the opportunity to have a visit like this, said EDO economic development officer John Watson, is a great opportunity to make connections that will only make that openness between the two countries better.

Attendees at the lunch asked only a couple of questions of Lukens, looking at issues like long-term residency between the two countries or the effect of the passport requirement on First Nations.

Lukens said after the lunch that his efforts in Canada, as a representative from the United States, is to help increase awareness of the issues that are important here. For instance with softwood lumber, a vast majority of American citizens don't know about the issue.

"It's a much bigger, much more emotional issue here on this side of the border," said Lukens. Nonetheless, he and other offices are trying hard to spread the word.

"Our mission here is working on that awareness."

reporter@comoxvalleyrecord.com