

From Company to 'Instant' Towns: Building Resilient Local Government in B.C.'s Resource Communities

Company Towns

Historically, British Columbia's (B.C.'s) political and social structures have been shaped by the nature of the province's economy. Nowhere was this fact more evident than in the remote communities that supported the province's lucrative resource extraction industries. Commonly referred to as "company" or "shack" towns, the land, buildings and services in these places were often wholly controlled by the same company that owned the adjacent mine or mill. Because companies were most concerned with the profitability of their operations, the residential and commercial design of these communities was often no more than an afterthought. Once the resource which supported a company town was depleted, or lost its value on the stock market, companies would shut down their operations, leaving behind a community without its economic foundation. Many of these communities became "ghost" towns as derelict buildings began to outnumber the dwindling population.

The Provincial Response

By the mid-1960's, the provincial government recognized that the difficult challenge of balancing economic and social interests in these places could no longer be managed by the companies alone. Previous Governments had attempted to both legislate and negotiate changes to the administration of company towns, but many of their problems remained. In 1965, the province's Department of Municipal Affairs (DMA), now called the Local Government Department (LGD), introduced a new approach which came to be known as the "instant towns" policy. According to historical geographer John Bradbury, the instant towns policy had three "cornerstones":

- In place of the disorganized physical layout of many company towns, new settlement sites were extensively planned for the orderly development of industrial, commercial and residential spaces.



Tahsis, an "instant town" on Vancouver Island. B.C. Archives: I-07247

- Once physically established, new sites would "instantly" attain municipal status. In place of the normal requirements for a full petition and vote of electors, the provincial government could now incorporate a municipality based on a lesser petition and no vote of approval in any area of the province with resource development potential. This allowed local government institutions, rather than the province or resource companies, to make decisions about land use, property taxation and infrastructure development in single-resource towns as soon as a resource site was established.
- The provincial government expected that well-planned, self-governing communities would lead to local ownership of residential and commercial properties in the long-term.

With these three cornerstones, policy-makers foresaw a number of positive outcomes. Well-planned spaces and democratically elected local governments would foster a greater sense of community. In turn, this vibrant community life and functioning property market would encourage diverse businesses to migrate to the town. Ultimately, policy-makers intended all of these measures to promote the long-term viability of resource towns.

As B.C. enjoyed unprecedented prosperity in the late 1960s, the province incorporated 11 instant towns. The locations of these communities closely paralleled the expansion of B.C.'s resource industries (see table below). In the Peace River region, the town of Hudson's Hope housed the workforce of the newly constructed W.A.C. Bennett hydroelectric dam. Northwest of Prince George, the town of Granisle supported one of B.C.'s first copper mines. By 1975, however, worldwide demand for B.C.'s resources was in decline. None of the instant towns became "ghost towns", but few expanded as the expected diversification of local economies was slow to materialize.

Table: Instant Towns in British Columbia: 1965-1971

Municipality	Date of Incorporation	Primary Industry	Region
Port Alice	June 16, 1965	Pulp	North Vancouver Island
Gold River	Aug. 26, 1965	Pulp and Paper	North Vancouver Island
Hudson's Hope	Nov. 16, 1965	Hydroelectric dam	Peace Region
Port McNeil	Feb. 18, 1966	Forestry	North Vancouver Island
MacKenzie	May 19, 1966	Pulp and Paper	North Central B.C.
Fraser Lake	Sept. 17, 1966	Molybdenum	Bulkley/Nechako
Houston	Jan. 31, 1969	Forestry	Bulkley/Nechako
Tahsis	June 17, 1970	Forestry	North Vancouver Island
Logan Lake	Nov. 10, 1970	Copper	Thompson/Okanagan
Granisle	June 29, 1971	Copper	Bulkley/Nechako
Elkford	July 16, 1971	Coal	East Kootenay

The Legacy of Instant Towns

Dan Campbell, then B.C.'s minister of Municipal Affairs, introduced the "instant towns" policy to the Union of British Columbia Municipalities' 1965 annual convention. He made clear that the province viewed local government as vital to the success of single resource towns:

"If there is a fundamental thing that we have come to accept in terms of local government, it is that communities are developed by all the people and for all the people, not for any one particular part of the people who happen to live in the community. The future promise of these instant municipalities is in terms of the Government's belief that local government is real government."

The work of the LGD in the years since suggests that its original emphasis on local government in resource towns remains important. When members of the department began developing the "second generation" instant town of Tumbler Ridge in the late 1970s, they sought new and innovative community planning models. In Tumbler Ridge, a commissioner-led local government oversaw the entire process of town planning. Those who conceived of the plan for Tumbler Ridge had therefore extended the original policy's emphasis on local government into the earliest stages of community development.

The LGD again returned to the idea of "instant" municipal incorporation when it confronted another challenge in the mid-1970s. As entrepreneurs began looking for ways to develop mountain resorts, the province needed to ensure that the communities supporting these resorts could be established and sustained. The resulting legislation enabling B.C.'s first large-scale ski resort (in what is now known as Whistler) allowed the province to "instantly" incorporate the area surrounding the mountain and establish a self-funding resort association to develop and promote the area. The LGD used the "instant town" model again when it returned to the question of ski-resorts in the mid-1990s and 2007. The 1995 *Mountain Resort Associations Act* and its consequential amendments allowed the Government to establish resort associations in any area offering ski and recreation facilities, incorporate mountain resort improvement districts and then transform them into mountain resort municipalities. Further amendments to the *Local Government Act* in 2007 augmented the authority to facilitate incorporation of mountain resort municipalities directly in unsettled areas.

By 2006, most of the original instant towns had confronted the difficult challenge of industry closure and survived as viable communities. Writing about the "resiliency" of these places for the 2006 World Urban Forum,

members of the LGD again noted the importance of local governments in leading the transition to diversified economies. With the resiliency of these places in mind, it is possible to view the "instant towns" policy as the beginning of a long, largely successful, experiment with local government and community viability in B.C.'s vast interior.

Sources/Further Information

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