

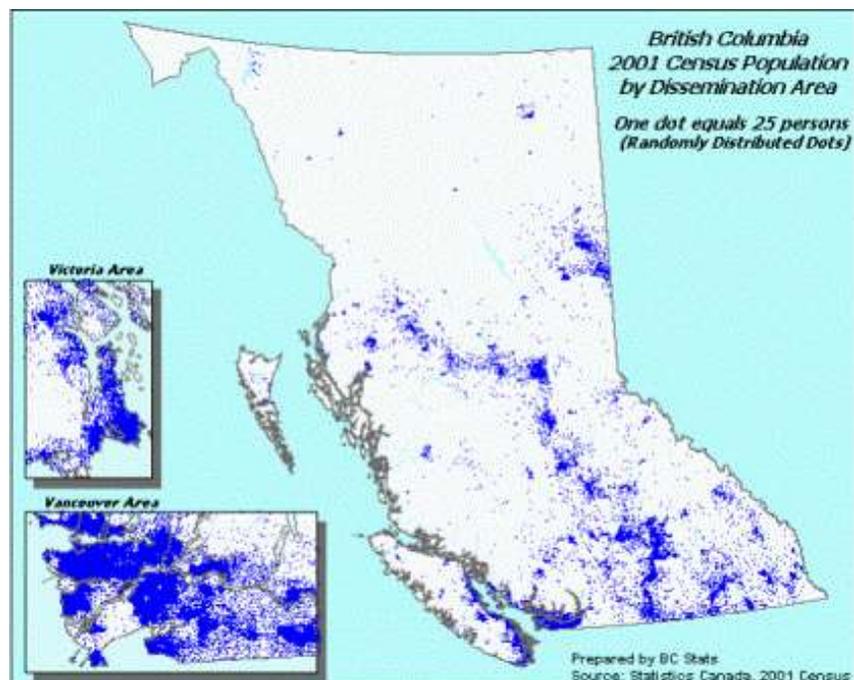
# Regional Districts Part 1: The Roots of Regional Districts

## The Regional Challenge

For more than half a century, Canada's provincial and municipal governments have confronted various challenges related to the delivery of efficient, economic and well-planned local services across regions. In a 1961 article, Canadian political scientist Thomas Plunkett described some of these challenges in the country's urban regions. According to Plunkett, "striking changes in the economic and social environment" of urban regions made municipalities "interdependent", despite their "political fragmentation". Roads, water services and policing, for example, were no longer contained "within limited political boundaries" (Plunkett, 30). For Plunkett, these changes meant neighbouring municipalities within a region needed better methods for a) co-operating in the delivery of local services and b) planning for growth management, infrastructure development and service equity.

In contrast to Canada's urban regions, rural parts of the country have dealt with an inverse challenge. In these areas, small and sometimes remote communities had difficulties developing infrastructure and delivering services with limited property tax bases. Ira Robinson, a geographer, wrote in 1962, that these places faced the difficult challenge of creating acceptable and viable communities in Canada's vast rural landscapes (Robinson, 6).

In B.C., these regional challenges were, and still are, particularly pronounced. With its mountainous terrain, much of the province remains sparsely inhabited. In 2006, 87% of the province's population lived in its 156 municipalities, which collectively occupied only 1.4% of the province's total area (Bish, 35). Most of B.C.'s population is concentrated in its south-western corner,



while the province's large Interior features clusters of archipelago-like settlements running through mountain valleys and aside long, thin lakes.

With limited areas available for settlement, B.C.'s urban municipalities faced the challenges of co-operating with each other earlier in the 20th century than elsewhere in Canada. By the 1940s unregulated growth and uncompensated use of municipal services in unincorporated areas adjacent to many urban municipalities had become a major issue.

In rural areas, the communication and transportation difficulties posed by vast mountain ranges were factors that had led to more autonomous local governments in B.C. However, the isolated setting of many small communities in B.C.'s interior meant it was often difficult to develop economical, locally-tailored services such as policing, road maintenance and garbage disposal.

### **Regional Governance Initiatives before 1945**

Between 1910 and 1945, a number of initiatives sought to address the province's diverse regional challenges. In the 1920s, amendments to B.C.'s *Water Act* introduced the improvement district (ID) as a tool for providing irrigated water to fruit-growers in unincorporated areas of the province. These IDs, which had the power to tax and were governed by an elected board, proved successful enough that by the 1930s non-farming communities adopted the model for other local services e.g. garbage disposal and fire protection.

In urban areas during the 1910s and 1920s, municipalities began to petition the Province for permission to join together to fund and administer individual services. In 1924, the Province passed a notably innovative act that established the Greater Vancouver Water District (GVWD) with a "joint" board made up of members appointed by each municipality. The *Greater Vancouver Water District Act* included provisions that allowed any other municipality in the region to decide whether or not to join the GVWD. This feature made the GVWD one of the first *voluntary* inter-municipal boards in North America. Because it facilitated co-operation and respected municipal autonomy, voluntarism became a principle of Provincial involvement in inter-municipal affairs. A number of similar boards were created for the joint provision of services by the 1940s. In 1946, the Province generalized the principle of voluntarism by amending the *Municipal Act* to allow two or more municipalities to jointly provide selected municipal services.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Province and municipalities developed other inter-local initiatives. Changes to the *Public Health Act* and the *Public*

*Libraries Act* in 1936 enhanced the ability of municipalities to jointly provide health inspection and library services. Major reforms to the province's education system in 1946 gave the Province a greater role in education financing and 'detached' school districts from their municipalities. The 74 new school districts replaced over 800 city, municipal, and rural school districts.

Outside of government, a committed group of academics and planning advocates joined together in 1937 to form the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Association (LMRPA) with the intention of raising awareness and support for regional planning. While inactive during the Second World War, members of the LMRPA went on to influence regional planning in B.C. after the war. (Wilson, 103).

### **The Second World War: Planning for Economic Development**

During the Second World War, the provincial government's interest in regional development grew. Concerned about demobilization and eager to facilitate economic development, B.C.'s Liberal-Conservative Coalition government enacted the *Post-War Rehabilitation Act* at the end of 1942. In 1944, the Province established a semi-permanent Bureau of Post-War Rehabilitation and Reconstruction. A year later, this Bureau added a Regional Planning Division (RPD), which developed the first integrated study of social, economic and geographic conditions throughout the Lower Mainland. Later, the RPD recommended the establishment of a Lower Mainland Regional Board (LMRB) to consider the future direction of growth in the Lower Mainland.

As part of its new focus on regions, the Coalition government also vigorously pursued economic development outside of the province's densely populated southwest. Reforms to industry regulation, highway construction in the Peace River region, and railway expansion to Prince George in the post-war period were all supported economic development in northern and interior regions of the province.

The role of local government in these regional initiatives, particularly outside urban areas, was limited. The Province focused on new economic opportunities, paying less attention to the inevitable demand for local services that regional development would entail. Before the 1950s, regional planning took place at the provincial level. The few local services that did exist in rural areas were usually provided by Provincial ministries or IDs.

## Assessing the Early Years

Today, B.C.'s regional governance framework is in many respects derived from pre-1945 attempts to address the province's regional challenges. By the end of the Second World War:

- elected IDs provided much needed local services to unincorporated communities at a lower cost than municipal incorporation,
- voluntary joint service boards in urban areas fostered inter-municipal relationships based on dialogue rather than coercion, and
- regional planning had become an issue for consideration by policy-makers because of both public advocacy in the Lower Mainland and provincial initiatives during the Second World War.

Later in the 20th century, these innovations were incorporated into B.C.'s regional governance and service delivery legislation.

However, most regional issues constituted a 'moving target' for policy-makers, as communities and their regional contexts change over time. The 1947 Goldenberg Commission, appointed by the province to investigate all aspects of local government, would recognize some of these ongoing regional challenges, including the need for increased inter-municipal co-operation in urban areas. While some single services were now handled by joint boards, the increasing complexity and cost of local services meant that a co-operative model based on *individual* services would not suffice in the long-term. Meanwhile, as the Provincial government began to consider planning for the future of its regions, it had yet to face the difficult challenge of co-operating with municipalities to shape the future of regions.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, it would become clear to Provincial policy-makers - particularly those leading its Department of Municipal Affairs (DMA) - that a more comprehensive and flexible approach to the challenges of regionalism in B.C. was required. Regional Districts: Part 2 describes these efforts to introduce effective regional governance in B.C. during the 1950s and 1960s.

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