

Regional Districts Part 2: J. Everett Brown and New Directions in the 1950s

During and after the Second World War, policy-makers across Canada considered social and economic issues with a new perspective. They were influenced by the Depression's economic uncertainty and the unprecedented social and economic planning that occurred as a result of the Second World War. Public policy-making flourished as medicare, unemployment insurance and federal housing programs all emerged in the post-war period.

Of equal importance, governments began developing new tools to co-ordinate, and plan for, socio-economic development. Part of this new planning orientation involved understanding how regions within provinces functioned as economic and social units. With this knowledge, governments hoped to both encourage and manage growth, particularly in the country's largest urban areas.

Regional Planning Boards

In many ways, B.C. led this new regional approach. As discussed in Regional Districts Part 1, the provincial government's post-war planning included a number of regional economic development initiatives. These initiatives included a comprehensive regional plan for the Lower Mainland and new transportation links to the province's interior. Perhaps the most innovative measure undertaken by the Province at this time was its regional planning board legislation.

During the war, provincial and local officials first met to discuss tools for co-ordinated planning among the Lower Mainland's twenty municipalities.

These post-war meetings, along with the sustained advocacy of Tom McDonald, a close advisor to the Liberal-Conservative Coalition government's finance minister, suggested regional planning legislation would be

Fraser River Flood in Mission



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presented to the Legislative Assembly. But it was the catastrophic Fraser River flood in the spring of 1948 that made regional planning politically feasible among the Lower Mainland's diverse municipalities. The flood cost dozens of lives and millions of dollars in infrastructure damage, convincing many officials of the need for flood plans that transcended municipal boundaries. Amendments to the *Town Planning Act* in 1948 gave the Minister of Municipal Affairs the power to establish regional planning boards in any area of the province (Wilson, 103).

These boards, with one representative from each municipality and one from the Province, were empowered to prepare a "plan for the physical development and improvement [of a region] in a systematic and orderly manner" (*RSBC, 1948 C.96, S.42*). They were also given the power to provide planning assistance to any of the communities in their areas. In 1949, the Province established the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board (LMRPB, see map below), followed by the Capital (or Greater Victoria) Regional Planning Board three years later. Six more boards followed over ten years, but none had as much influence or longevity as the LMRPB.

Among its many other accomplishments, the LMRPB developed a comprehensive dyke system and flood plan, established a region-wide street-numbering system and, produced the *Official Regional Plan (ORP)* for the Lower Mainland in 1966. Although controversial at the time, the ORP has influenced land use planning since its creation. The research it generated and its strategies for managing regional growth remain important to planners throughout the Lower Mainland today.

Approximate Area of the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board



Map created using Google Maps

The Goldenberg Commission

The enactment of a framework for regional planning in 1949 reflected planning advocates' and provincial policy-makers' of the growing interconnectedness between municipalities. There was less clarity about how this interconnectedness would influence the delivery of local services. Recognizing that municipalities faced serious challenges after the Second World War, the Province appointed Carl Goldenberg. Goldenberg was a Montreal lawyer who had analyzed municipal systems in the past decade. He was appointed to evaluate all aspects of the province's local government system. It was only as Goldenberg heard contributions from across the province that he began to observe connections between each municipality's challenges and their relationships with neighbouring municipalities.

Goldenberg was asked to investigate seven areas of concern to local governments including municipal taxation, borrowing and provincial-municipal financial relations. He travelled across the province and heard briefs from 72 municipalities and other public bodies. While many of his final recommendations dealt with municipal finance and the re-organization of municipal-provincial funding formulas for social services, Goldenberg also focused attention on the importance of regional issues.

According to Goldenberg, the legal framework governing municipalities no longer corresponded to the economic and social conditions of B.C.'s communities. He described the regions of Greater Victoria and Greater Vancouver as "integrated urban areas, divided into a number of separate but economically interdependent municipalities, with consequent duplication of effort and varying standards of service" (British Columbia 1947, 18). He observed that increasing urban integration had begun to cause tension in the predominantly agricultural municipalities surrounding cities (e.g. Saanich and Richmond). In these municipalities, farms with fewer local service requirements were now adjacent to subdivided developments with distinctly urban needs. This created debates between residents over land use and service priorities. Goldenberg also drew attention to the unorganized areas adjacent to many municipalities where uncontrolled development and the uncompensated use of municipal services required greater regulation.

Goldenberg's recommendations for resolving regional issues were fairly limited. For the most part, they amounted to asking municipalities to make greater use of recently enacted legislation that allowed for inter-municipal service delivery. In the years to come, it became clear to policy-makers that existing legislation did not provide enough incentives for inter-municipal co-operation, and that a more comprehensive approach was required. Nevertheless, Goldenberg's report was vital because it helped B.C.'s local

government policy-makers begin to understand the challenges of municipal interdependency.

Ev Brown and a new Direction for the Department of Municipal Affairs in the 1950s

One policy advisor who would play a key role in new regional initiatives was James Everett (Ev) Brown, who served as the secretary to the Goldenberg Commission early in his career. After working for the commission and learning about the challenges municipalities faced, Brown joined the Department of Municipal Affairs (DMA). Within four years, Brown became Deputy Minister and immediately led the department to explore more comprehensive solutions to the regional problems first identified by the Goldenberg Commission in 1948. During Brown's fifteen years as Deputy Minister, the Department devoted much time and effort to these challenges. It was only after significant experimentation in the 1950s, that the government developed a comprehensive regional governance system.

James Everett (Ev) Brown



Photo courtesy of the Local Government Management Association

At the beginning of Brown's tenure, the DMA publicly expressed its interest in working with municipalities to address the challenges of regional service delivery. During the 1954 Union of British Columbia Municipalities' (UBCM) convention, Minister Wesley Black spoke about the problem of "rapid urbanization...both in rural areas and in areas adjacent to municipalities." He suggested that Goldenberg's 1948 recommendations had been too limited and he invited municipalities to work with the Department to develop alternatives. Minister Black proposed the idea of a "two-layer" system of local government for rural municipalities that were dealing with growing pockets of urban settlement. He also suggested further study and consultation was required before a regional governance framework could be adopted (UBCM 1954, 41).

Rural Services and Planning on the Urban Fringe

Writing in 1968 reflecting on his experience helping to develop regional governance in B.C., Brown identified two "sorts of problems" that the system faced after the Goldenberg Commission (Brown, 82). One sort involved the province's "non-metropolitan trading areas." These areas typically featured

small, compact cities (such as Prince George and Kelowna) surrounded by a fringe of settlement on non-municipal land. Beyond these areas small communities were interspersed across expanses of forests and mountains. For Brown, these trading areas were unique in Canada. Elsewhere rural counties existed that provided basic services to small towns and helped to regulate growth in new fringe settlements. Brown viewed the absence of service mechanisms and local representation in non-municipal parts of B.C.'s interior as a pressing issue for both the DMA and the province as a whole. These areas were home to almost 300,000 British Columbians in 1956.

As early as 1947 the DMA sought to resolve fringe and rural issues by amending the *Town Planning Act* to allow for zoning, building inspection and regulation by the DMA in designated unincorporated areas. Most regulated areas that the DMA established were located near cities. By 1957, there were regulated areas near Kelowna, Prince George and Nanaimo, and in twelve other areas throughout the province. As part of major reforms to local government legislation in 1957, the DMA also developed a new *Local Services Act*. Among other things, this Act expanded the DMA's local government role in non-municipal fringe areas. In addition to land use planning and regulation, the DMA could now provide garbage collection, ambulance and fire services to residents.

According to Brown, the 1957 reforms were a "stop-gap" measure. By 1960, it was apparent that the outcomes of the new measures were mixed: "while I think the results [of the *Local Services Act*] were beneficial, their administration from the Capital City proved very difficult" (Brown, 83). It was increasingly apparent to Brown and other DMA policy advisors that service delivery in B.C.'s unorganized territory required administration that was accountable and responsive to a locally-elected body.

Regional Governance in Urban Areas

The other type of problem Brown discussed in his 1968 paper involved what he described as metropolitan areas. In his writings about the Lower Mainland and Greater Victoria, Brown noted:

The dividing line between adjacent municipalities was becoming completely obliterated, and the resulting interrelationships were such that the informal methods of resolving problems [were] both too slow and too uncertain (Brown, 82).

By 1957, the Department appeared to have developed a method for introducing regional government for urban areas. The new *Municipal Act* introduced in that year included a section allowing the Minister of

Municipal Affairs to establish "joint committees," made up of municipal representatives within an urban region to study "matters of an inter-municipal nature as shall be set out by the Minister in his directive" (*SBC 1957, C.42, S.773*).

The first (and only) of these metropolitan joint committees, known by its chair Hugo Ray, spent two years considering the challenges facing the Greater Vancouver area. The government instructed the Ray Committee to consider whether a metropolitan board should be responsible for some or all of the following functions: water supply, sewage treatment, public health, hospital financing and administration, land use planning in the Greater Vancouver area, and regional parks.

The Ray Committee attracted significant academic interest from the University of British Columbia. Over its two year life-span, the Committee funded more than a dozen comparative and analytical studies examining aspects of metropolitan government. Through 1958 and 1959, the committee met on a number of occasions to consider these reports and develop a proposal for metropolitan government.

The Ray Committee delivered its report to the Minister of Municipal Affairs in January 1960. The report recognized the region's "interdependent" future, and recommended the establishment of a metropolitan governing board that would have power over all of the functions the committee had originally been instructed to consider; the only exception being hospital administration (Metropolitan Joint Committee, 36).

The responses of municipalities in Greater Vancouver suggested that any attempt to establish a metropolitan board would face significant challenges. New Westminster's representatives on the Ray Committee voiced their strong disagreement with the overall scope of the proposed metropolitan board during the committee's final deliberations. Following delivery of the report, Port Coquitlam's council passed a resolution sternly rejecting the metropolitan plan. The resolution stated that the municipality's problems were quite different than those of the City of Vancouver. Ray himself expressed concern that an unenthusiastic general public might not support the plan in a plebiscite. Both public apathy and the vocal opposition of councils led the Minister to shelve the report in late 1960.

A Change of Plans

For Canadian practitioners and academics involved with local government, the concept of metropolitan government became increasingly popular in the 1950s. This concept was commonly understood as a two-tiered system of

urban government with each tier responsible for specified functions. Many in North America looked to Toronto's metropolitan government, created in 1954, as a model for future local government reforms and Manitoba's establishment of a metropolitan government for Winnipeg in 1960 reflected the growing acceptance of the concept in Canada.

Although the Ray Committee considered metropolitan government for Greater Vancouver, by 1961 it had become clear that this form of regional government would be incompatible in B.C.'s system of local government. For one thing, the high degree of municipal autonomy that characterizes B.C.'s local government system meant regional initiatives had to be accepted by local politicians. As Brown noted in 1968:

We made an initial attempt to interest people in a 'Metro Toronto' type of government, but this did not prove readily saleable. When it became clear that a metro type of organization...was not likely to be acceptable, we were then faced with finding an alternative (Brown, 83).

B.C.'s strong tradition of municipal autonomy also affected regional planning in the 1950s. The LMRPB achieved much through its extensive regional research initiatives and its public advocacy. But when the LMRPB officials reflected on its influence in the late 1960s, they lamented that many of their policy proposals had been "ignored" by municipalities in the Lower Mainland (LMRPB, 23). Outside of the Lower Mainland, the Capital Region Planning Board made some progress, but regional planning boards elsewhere in the province struggled to gain a foothold.

British Columbia's regional challenges were also broader than elsewhere in the country. Whereas the settled portions of other provinces had some form of local government, a huge portion of B.C.'s land mass lay outside municipal boundaries and lacked any form of democratic representation except for a local member elected to the Legislative Assembly. Since almost a quarter of B.C.'s population lived outside municipal boundaries, this was not a trivial concern. After Goldenberg's report in 1947, Ev Brown and the DMA recognized the desirability of local government for these areas. However, they struggled to develop a suitable and cost-effective framework for local service delivery.

A dozen years after the Goldenberg report and five years after Ev Brown had become the Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs B.C. still lacked a framework for regional governance. After years of consultation and policy development, the 1957 *Municipal Act* and *Local Services Act* introduced tools which the DMA hoped would be used by municipalities and unincorporated communities to address inter-local and regional issues. At the turn of the decade, however, DMA policy advisors realized that a new approach was

necessary. The 1950s could be characterized by an increasingly intense departmental focus on flaws in the fabric of regional and local governance in B.C. that gave way to a new decade of even more intense thought and activity - in which the DMA played an important role. The new approach that emerged in the 1960s is discussed in **Regional Districts Part 3: The Rise of Regional Districts**.

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