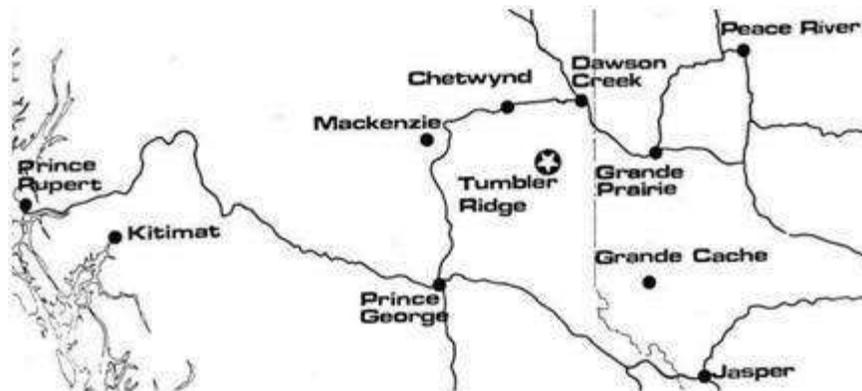


Tumbler Ridge: Birth of a Resilient Community

Tumbler Ridge is located in north eastern British Columbia. Developed as a coal mining community, the town has successfully adjusted to changing market conditions. Through the innovation and commitment of local residents and district staff, Tumbler Ridge managed to withstand the near collapse of their primary industry.

Tumbler Ridge began as a megaproject designed to capitalize on rising energy prices. It is the province's last 'instant town'. These towns became instant municipalities in order to encourage long-term settlement and community development in remote resource communities.

In 1976, in response to Japanese demands for coking coal, the B.C. government commissioned studies of coal mining potential in the north-east corner of the province. The Province sought to establish a planned resource community that could develop the region's coal resources. The Local Government Department (LGD) had a prominent role in selecting the town site, and coordinating town planning and administration



The LGD was involved in studying the feasibility of building a town to serve the proposed mines. Brian Walisser, policy analyst at the time, recalls,

We knew where the coal was but we didn't have the name Tumbler Ridge yet. We didn't even really know for sure we wanted a community. What about fly-in/fly-out or other options? We knew that Japan wanted coal and we knew that B.C. wanted its coal resources developed. So we started with an analytical piece regarding settlement--a review of the major questions and options.

Gary Harkness, who was the LGD's planning director, was instrumental in bringing this piece forward. Harkness recalls that, "we helicoptered planning staff to check out two or three possible sites. Some of the early work identified Flatbed Creek as a town site. I saw the name 'Tumbler Ridge' as a better town name, so I did some editing. Nobody questioned the name change".

When Gary Paget joined the LGD as a planner, the project was well underway. Paget remembers that "Increasingly the decision was coalescing around Tumbler Ridge. That had a lot to do with geography and buildability of the site, and the environmental attractiveness of the site".

The LGD coordinated the completion of the planning program for a proposed new community, including town site design and engineering. Paget recalls that the main LGD participants included "Tony Quin and me on the planning side, and Brian Walisser on the policy side. We didn't have the staff, and we didn't have all the right skills to do it. We needed environmental planners, social development planners, engineers, and financial analysts. So we had to recruit a team."



Paget and Quin were on the panel that selected the comprehensive planner for Tumbler Ridge. The panel chose a team headed by planner and architect Richard Rabnett. The five volume conceptual plan was published in 1978, and ultimately earned Rabnett and Paget a Canadian Institute of Planners' Award for Planning

Excellence in 1983.

In 1981, a consortium of Japanese steel mills signed a 15-year purchasing contract with the Denison and Teck mining corporations, and the federal government. Construction on the town site began that same year and the District of Tumbler Ridge was incorporated on April 9, 1981--long before it had any residents.

The Province appointed Pat Walsh, former mayor of Fort St. John, to be the town's commissioner. Paget recalls how Walsh was selected:

We were looking for somebody who was going to be accepted in the North. He had to have political judgement. We were throwing out names, and my boss, Gary Harkness, said "How about Pat Walsh of Fort St. John?" and I said "Yes, perfect". He was a lawyer from Dalhousie, a brilliant guy and a wonderful person, extremely well respected up there. It never would have been successful had it not been for him. He saw Rabnett's conceptual plan. He saw the vision of a new kind of community in the North; he was excited by that vision and wanted to deliver it.

Walsh steered the town's development until the first civic election was held in 1983.

The Quintette and Bullmoose coal mines opened in 1983. Despite the early optimism of investors, the industry struggled with price reductions and market uncertainty throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s. The Quintette mine closed prematurely in 2000 and the Bullmoose mine followed in 2003--leaving the town without its major employers and tax base.

These developments were difficult for Paget and the LGD: "It was very painful. This was something that we had birthed and had got national attention, and all of a sudden it was on the ropes. But what was surprising was the resilience of the town, and how it bounced back--the way in which the town and the region got together and worked out a plan for its survival."

By designing a liveable town, planners hoped to create a community that could thrive after the coal boom. As Paget recalls,

We knew that resource towns have their cycles. We tried to build Tumbler Ridge so that, from a social side, people would be committed to the community so that when the down-cycle came along they didn't just pack up and leave. The emphasis was on creating a place...the commitment to place...and knowing that this was a beautiful place that had oil and gas resources, forest resources, some tourism potential. We thought we should build a place that would last. We knew that the contract was for fifteen years but we also knew that there were hundreds of years of coal in the ground. That was in our minds.

The LGD has a role when resource towns experience major industry closures and downturns. Paget describes how the LGD's,

point of entry is financial, and the fact that these towns are losing their tax base. In Tumbler Ridge about sixty percent of the tax revenue was from the mines; when you lose 60% of your tax base it's quite a shock. Then there's the social-economic dimension: intergovernmental teams are formed. Health

gets involved, Economic Development, Income Assistance... all of these agencies come together, and studies get done because there's a community and roots and local government. If it's just a company, then the company rolls up the town.

Paget also notes that despite these interventions,

Local government was central to the rebirth of Tumbler Ridge, because only local government can speak for a town. The union was going to take care of its members but the councillors said, "We're responsible for the town. We want the town to survive, so we've got to figure out a way for it to survive".

After the Quintette mine closed in March 2000, the town council formed the Tumbler Ridge Revitalization Task Force. The Task Force was composed of local and regional politicians, community and business leaders; and provincial officials, including Rob Rounds, then the LGD's Financial Services Manager. The Province assumed the municipality's debt and dedicated funding for services. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation had guaranteed the mortgages and eventually acquired the houses. Later the municipality bought most of the houses and returned them to the market at a reduced price. These measures helped to stave off municipal bankruptcy, fortify local services, and stabilize the population.

The Province's involvement in Tumbler Ridge's revitalization was led by the Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteer's Community Transitions Branch. This branch joined the LGD in 2001.

In 2003-04, as part of the World Urban Forum, the LGD had an opportunity to revisit the history of Tumbler Ridge. This occurred as part of a large, inter-provincial study of resource towns in transition, conducted by a team led by Brian Walisser and Brent Mueller. Paget describes how,

Out of that they produced a wonderful publication, and one of the key case studies was Tumbler Ridge--how it had gone down and how it had bounced back. For the 2006 World Urban Forum, I collaborated with Brian and Brent on the paper, "The Resilient City", which built on the ministry's research and which featured Tumbler Ridge. This publication uses 'resiliency', a word that Richard Rabnett and I adapted from ecological literature... the resiliency of ecological systems. By the time the 2006 paper came along, it had become a rooted sociological concept.

Tumbler Ridge has indeed proven resilient. The town continues to grow, and the development potential envisioned by its planners, in areas such as oil and gas exploration, forestry, and tourism, now drives the local economy.

Furthermore, the global resurgence in energy prices has resulted in the opening of several new mining operations. These developments, along with the resourcefulness of local residents and district staff, bode well for the future of B.C.'s last instant town.

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