

# DEVELOPING A PLANNING STRATEGY AND VISION FOR RURAL-URBAN FRINGE AREAS: A CASE STUDY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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## Résumé

La zone périphérique urbaine-rurale pose de nombreux défis juridiques et politiques en ce qui concerne sa planification et gestion adéquate. L'analyse se concentre sur le taux de croissance, le genre et l'emplacement des zones dans les régions non régies par un gouvernement local en Colombie Britannique. Il a été discuté que la nature désorganisée suivant laquelle le développement de ces territoires non municipalisés a été poursuivi est le résultat de la mauvaise coordination entre les différentes administrations régissant ces territoires. Cet article conclut qu'une méthode d'aborder ce problème à l'échelon supérieur pourrait aboutir à une réussite si une pensée provinciale était jointe à une vision saine d'urbanisme, en ce qui concerne le développement de ces régions non municipalisées.

**Mots clés:** périphérique urbaine-rurale, Colombie Britannique, régions non municipalisées, développement, urbanisme, gouvernement local

## Abstract

The rural-urban fringe poses numerous legal, political and procedural challenges regarding its proper governance and planning. This paper focuses upon the rate, form and location of fringe developments in British Columbia's unincorporated areas. It is argued that the chaotic nature of development results from a messy and uncoordinated governance structure where unincorporated territories are concerned. The paper concludes that a superior coordinated approach could be achieved by incorporating into provincial thought a sound planning vision regarding the development of the unincorporated areas.

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**Key words:** rural-urban fringe, British Columbia, unincorporated areas, development, planning, local government.

## **Introduction**

Planning at the rural-urban fringe has posed long-standing challenges, including: documenting and recording land use changes at the urban fringe (Hathout 2002, Pond & Yeates 1994); creating operational definitions of the various components comprising rural-urban fringe environments (Bryant *et al.* 1982, Friedland 2002); controlling extreme development pressures (Isakson & Ecker 2001, Pacione 1991); the loss of agricultural land (Beauchesne & Bryant 1999, Pierce 1981) and bringing together the diverse interests of a variety of private and public stakeholders in order to properly manage fringe lands (Bryant 1995, Halseth 1996). Planners and policy makers have responded to these challenges with a variety of policies, regulatory approaches, and institutional-governance frameworks (Bryant *et al.* 1982, Daniels 1999, Easley 1992, Sancton 1994).

Yet planning ideas to address fringe developments tend to minimize the type and diversity of governance institutions involved in managing fringe growth, particularly in unincorporated areas beyond the metropolitan areas. The governance system in non-metropolitan areas is much more complex than has apparently been understood by past research (Goodwin 1998, Magnusson 1985). While emphasis has been placed on the complex and fragmented governance structure of metropolitan areas (Barlow 1991, Bourne 1999, Sancton 1994), the multi-jurisdictional aspects of governing the rural-urban fringe in non-metropolitan areas has received much less attention.

This paper examines the various planning strategies and visions that emerged in response to fringe development within British Columbia's unincorporated territories beyond the metropolitan areas of Vancouver and Victoria over the past eighty years. The Province's unincorporated areas are defined as any lands beyond the boundaries of municipal governments, i.e., cities, towns, villages or district municipalities, although such a definition does not mean that unincorporated areas are unorganized from a political and administrative standpoint. In fact, they typically are ripe with institutional fragmentation resulting in multifarious experiments regarding the management of fringe growth. This paper, therefore, explores the complexities in achieving consistent and comprehensive planning in a multi-jurisdictional environment, particularly in the face of strong urban-economic and demographic pressures at the urban fringe.

The paper argues that a coordinated, consistent, and comprehensive planning vision was, and still is, lacking for British Columbia's rural-urban fringe within its unincorporated territories. This argument is developed around two points. One,

an ineffective local, regional and provincial institutional structure was created which exasperated and frustrated attempts to develop a sound planning vision. Two, rules governing the changes, both spatially and functionally, to existing governance institutions were never tied to a well-rounded planning strategy to manage fringe growth in the unincorporated areas. The paper concludes that a superior coordinated approach could be achieved by incorporating into provincial thought a sound planning vision regarding the development of the unincorporated areas. This argument is exposed when the historical sequences of innovations and changes to the institutional structures governing fringe growth in different unincorporated areas are examined and compared with each other.

British Columbia's governance institutions having the most impact and potential to manage fringe developments are divided into five specific components for detailed analysis and discussion: i) Municipal Corporations (e.g., cities, towns, villages and districts) and their expansion into unincorporated areas (e.g., annexation); ii) the creation of single purpose local agencies; iii) provincial ministries (e.g., municipal affairs, transportation, health and environment); iv) the creation of regional districts; and v) the institution of the Agricultural Land Commission. The analysis deals mainly with non-metropolitan British Columbia, i.e., the areas beyond the lower mainland (the city of Vancouver and surrounding suburban municipalities such as Burnaby, Richmond and Surrey) and the capital region (the city of Victoria and adjacent suburban municipalities).

Furthermore, the paper's focus on the above five governance institutions omits detailed discussion of the Province's recent *Growth Strategies Act* which has been dealt with by the author in greater detail elsewhere (Meligrana 2000a). Also, the diversity of regulatory tools and frameworks available within British Columbia's local government system not discussed in this paper can be found in other works (see, for example, Bish & Clemens 1999).

### **Local State Institutions, Rules of the Game and the Rural-Urban Fringe: A Context**

Although most jurisdictions commonly divide their local government system into rural and urban municipal governments (Tindal & Tindal 1990), this has not typically solved the complicated jurisdictional environment in which the planning and management of rural-urban environments usually takes place. It is necessary, therefore, to sort out a few terms and concepts regarding local governance institutions. Useful is Magnusson's discussion of the local state and its division into various components including: central agencies for local purposes, local agencies of the central state, central agencies in the locality, and local/municipal governments (Figure 1). This division draws attention to the local state as encompassing something more than just municipal governments. Magnusson

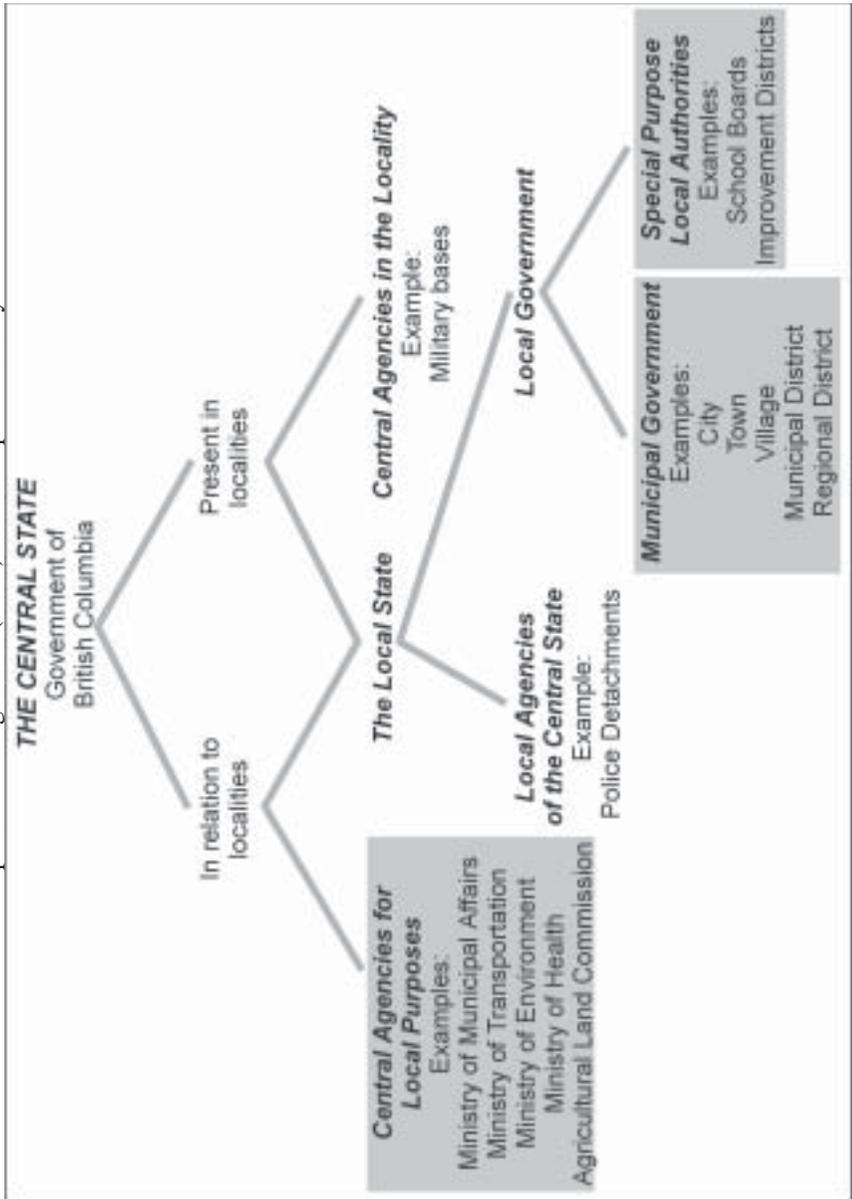
refers to the local state as "...the state in so far as it is physically present in the local community and acts in relation to that community" (Magnusson 1985, p. 578). The local state includes municipal governments, the elected local government with certain legislative powers regarding financial matters and planning, and special purpose local authorities, such as school boards or water boards. Municipal governments and special purpose authorities represent a subset of the local state referred to as the local government. However, the local state also includes local agencies of the central state such as police departments which are physically present in the locality, but do not have a direct role in any solution to the fringe developments. Outside the local state are found the local agencies for the central state, such as a ministry of municipal affairs, which regulate the operation of the entire local government system. In other words, the local agencies of the central state, although not physically present in the locality, create the rules and regulations involving the behaviour of the local state. Such rules are important in any attempt to manage growth in the rural-urban fringe as discussed below.

Magnusson's terms are particularly useful in their application to British Columbia's local government system where a collection of municipal governments, single-purpose local authorities, and local agencies of the central state combined to address fringe developments (Figure 1). Moreover, Magnusson's conceptualization of local state and local agencies of the central state draws attention to the vagueness of the term "unincorporated" area (see also Friedland 2002). While British Columbia's unincorporated areas are defined as any lands beyond the boundaries of municipal governments, such a division is too general in face of the varied arrangements found. Unincorporated areas can be organized as single purpose local authorities, such as improvement districts or school boards; as agricultural and forest land reserves established and controlled by the Agricultural Land Commission; or as Nature and Islands Trusts. Furthermore, most unincorporated areas fall within the jurisdictions of a regional district, and there are a number of provincial ministries that directly and indirectly control, regulate, and organize various aspects of land development in the Province's unincorporated areas.

To expand upon Magnusson's conceptual model of the local government system, both its spatial and temporal dimensions must be further developed. Figure 2 illustrates these two dimensions. The hypothetical spatial form of each layer is shown in approximate historical stages. The components of the governance system and their corresponding legislative authorities are identified to the right. At the bottom of Figure 2 are the unincorporated areas, the blank slate upon which different layers of governance have been added at various moments in time with each having its own spatial form and regulatory powers.

**Figure 1. Organization of the Local Government System**

Source: Adapted from Magnusson (1985). BC examples added by author.



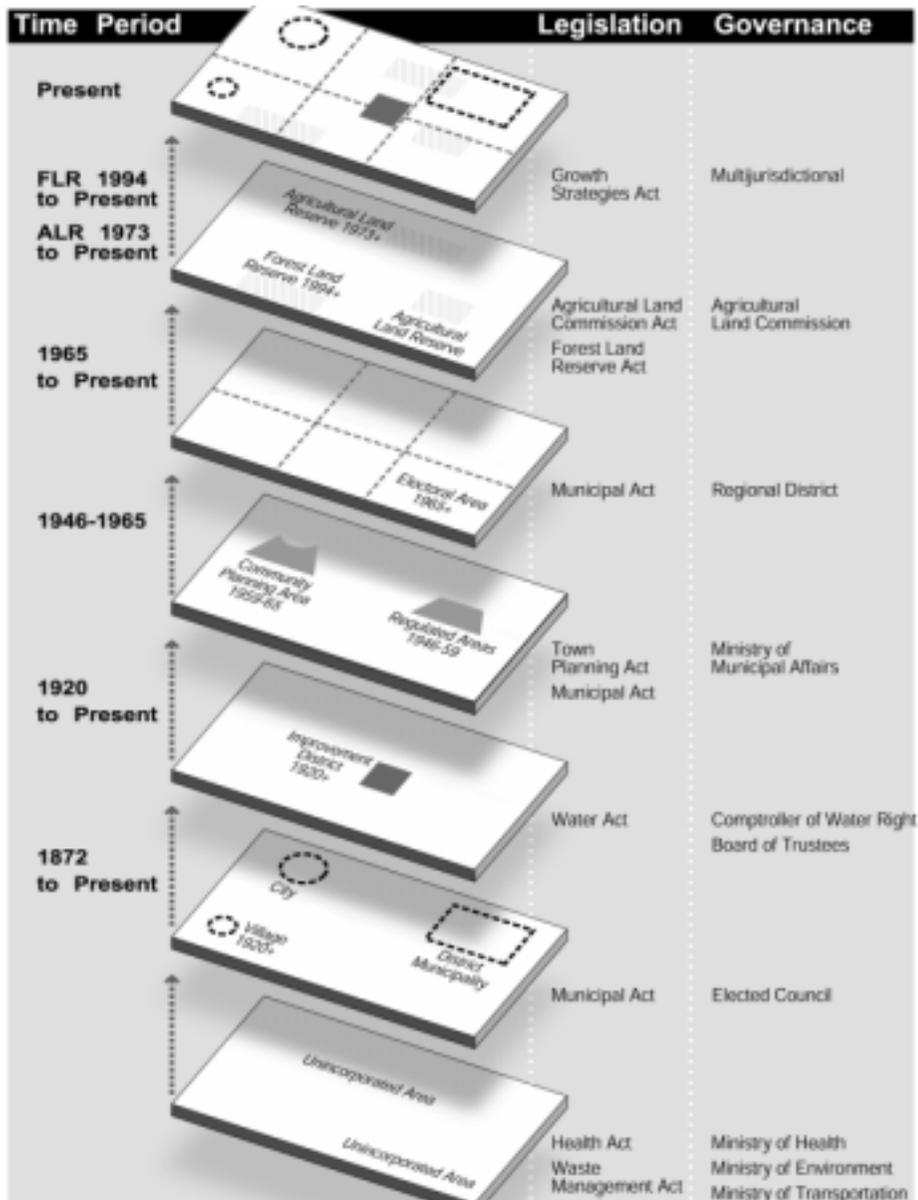
Note: Shaded Areas identify key components to governing fringe developments in British Columbia.

Thus, the paper first explores the classification and spatial form of municipal governments as well as the annexation of unincorporated areas by municipal governments. Next, single purpose local agencies, namely improvement districts, are identified as the leading edge of urban development. This is followed by an analysis of the role of various provincial ministries directly involved in the urbanization of unincorporated territories. More recent institutions, such as regional districts and the Agricultural Land Commission, are then examined. Understanding this historical sequence of various provincial agencies, municipal governments and special purpose authorities is critical to developing contemporary efforts to adequately manage and plan the rural-urban fringe.

Figures 1 and 2 also illustrate the importance of geographic scale: central agencies (e.g., Ministry of Municipal Affairs) examine the 'big' picture; municipal governments (e.g., a city) are in charge of a much smaller geographic area; and the special purpose local authorities (e.g., an improvement district), have smaller or narrower spheres of responsibilities. The territorial structure of municipal governments, central agencies for local purposes, and special purpose local authorities influences the political action space in which public officials direct their energies in the form of public debate, plans, regulations and policies to appropriately manage the political territorial envelope. It is not too hard to imagine, for example, that a provincial ministry of municipal affairs might approach the subject of fringe development differently from, say, a municipal government and again differently from a special purpose local authority (see Swainson 1983). Fringe developments, therefore, pose a particularly sticky problem since developments beyond established municipal-political space involve many different political actors having differing spatial perspectives (Bryant 1995, Daniels 1999, Halseth 1996).

The legal procedures or 'rules-of-the-game' that allow for or structure the policy response to developments in unincorporated areas are also an important part of the story of developing a planning vision for such areas. Such 'rules' are found within specific pieces of provincial legislation. Further, the 'rules' determine which institutions of the local government system control the rate, form and location of fringe developments. The 'rules', therefore, influence how growth and developments are interpreted and the types of solutions presented. In a rather provocative statement Razin claims that: "Urban sprawl, fuelled by powerful market forces, is unlikely to be controlled by macro-scale regional plans..." (Razin 1998: 321). He advocates changing the 'rules of the game' to achieve better results at managing the rural-urban fringe. Thus, the examination provided here of the rules regulating the establishment and restructuring of various governance institutions is an important and useful vehicle to explore the context in which planning visions can be developed for the fringe areas of unincorporated territories.

Figure 2. Spatial Organization of British Columbia's Unincorporated Areas

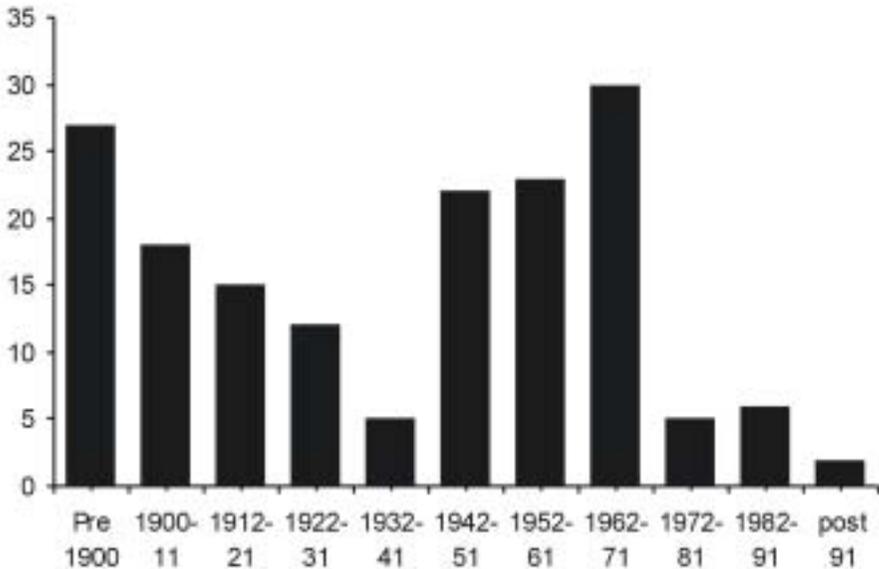


### British Columbia's Municipal Governments: The Incorporated Areas

The incorporation of municipalities was a primary vehicle through which local government was brought to the unincorporated territories of British Columbia. The history of incorporation of municipalities shows a bipolar distribution reflecting the changing economic circumstances of the Province (Figure 3). Incorporations that occurred around the turn of the previous century were primarily a response to the growing logging and mining industries, particularly on the Lower Coast. The number of municipalities incorporating during the twenties and thirties declined substantially in comparison with the earlier period, reflecting the Great Depression. Post World War II demographic and urban-economic expansion was expressed by a flurry of municipal incorporations from 52 in 1941 to 117 in 1991.

The Province's local government system originally (1872) recognized two legal categories of municipal governments, city and district municipality (Figure 2). The district municipalities were to be expansive areas that might include small unincorporated urban nodes set in agricultural areas. The city was to be

**Figure 3. Number of Municipalities by Year of Incorporation, British Columbia**



Source: Statistics Canada

Note: Number of municipalities as of 1996.

a smaller and spatially more compact form of municipal government. Thus, urban and rural categories of municipal government were defined.

The city classification, however, was not the preferred form of municipal government as a means to organizing development in the unincorporated territories. For example the number of cities, approximately twenty-eight, remained constant throughout the post-war period when the provincial population grew by some 53 percent between 1951 and 1991. Preference was given to the smaller more compact urban categories of villages and towns, as well as the district municipalities, defined not by population but density.

In 1920, legislation established the village classification to enable the creation of a municipal form at the request of at least 500 property owners in a given area (Figure 2). Towns were instituted as a form of local government mainly to service the growing resource developments of the interior, peaking under the 1960s 'instant towns' legislation (Bradbury 1980). The village and town municipal government, therefore, serviced the specific settlement needs associated primarily with natural resource development in unincorporated areas.

The district municipality, with its low-density criterion, increased in number from twelve in the 1940s to over thirty in the 1990s. In fact some cities, such as Campbell River, were reincorporated as district municipalities. Thus the preference for this type of municipal government within the unorganized areas was one that had a broad spatial form and encompassed both rural and urban areas.

To date, the Province has not changed the defining criteria of its municipal government classifications even in the case of over forty years of powerful forces transforming the provincial space economy. Furthermore, the Province has established no other planning criteria to divide its incorporated areas into a hierarchy of municipal governments. Thus, it may have set up conditions for fringe development and the attendant problems where municipal boundaries were drawn too tightly around existing urban development (Meligrana 2000b).

### **Annexations by Municipal Governments**

Urban development at the margins of municipal governments exerted pressure to expand municipal boundaries. The large amount of territory absorbed by annexation into the jurisdiction of municipal governments during the past decades reflects a policy of containment of urban growth through the expansion of existing municipalities (Figure 4). The volume and number of annexations were concentrated in certain key areas, namely the south-eastern coast of Vancouver Island, the Okanagan Valley and the east Kootenays. The amount of land annexed appears to be positively correlated with municipal population, for example, Figure 4 illustrates that the most populous municipalities (Prince George, Kamloops, Kelowna and Nanaimo) annexed substantial amounts of

unincorporated territory.

The transfer of land from the unincorporated areas into the jurisdiction of a municipal government is governed by provincial statute (British Columbia 1972, Pyplacz 1984). The Province's *Municipal Act* contained procedures that delegated authority over annexation almost entirely to local decision makers. This populist procedure for deciding boundary adjustments is revealed by early statutory regulations that stated the Minister of Municipal Affairs can only enact a boundary extension after receiving a petition from the municipal council or upon notification from a municipal council of the intent to expand. The council could hold a vote at its discretion, but is obligated to call a vote if at least 10 percent of municipal owner-electors express their opposition. The Minister could require a vote if 'substantial' opposition is received from property owners in the unincorporated area affected by the boundary extension.

These populist annexation procedures created a dilemma for both the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and existing municipal governments. On the one hand, the Province (as well as the municipalities) desired that urban developments within unincorporated areas be annexed, if possible, to an existing adjacent municipality (British Columbia 1972). This position, however, came up against provincial annexation procedures that relied on popular support from residents both inside and outside a municipality. During the Post World War II decades, the Province attempted to balance its objective of having urban developments come within the jurisdiction of municipal governments with the desire to preserve local autonomy and local determination of annexation applications. Nevertheless, the Province proved little legislative or policy guidance on such key issues as where and why development would take shape, and its relation to municipal boundary expansion plans.

Such a balancing act was attempted through various changes to the annexation voting procedures. Initially, these required a three-fifths majority of property owners within the area to be annexed and in the annexing municipality. This proved unworkable for municipalities with high population growth rates in adjacent fringe areas. For example, an annexation vote in Nanaimo lost by barely 1 percentage of votes cast (*Vancouver Sun* 1973). Here, media reports suggested that almost 80 percent of Nanaimo city residents voted in favour of annexation, while 60 percent of unincorporated residents voted against (*The Province* 1974, 9). In the mid-1970s, procedures were altered so that an annexation could be enacted by a simple majority of all residents (both incorporated and unincorporated). This worked to favour municipal governments with large populations strongly in favour of annexation. For example, even though the support for the city of Nanaimo's annexation decreased from 59 percent in 1971 to 52 percent in 1974 the application was approved. More recently, however, the Minister of Municipal Affairs has required a double majority where the votes within the annexing municipality and the unincorporated areas are

**Figure 4. Hectares Annexed by Municipal Government, 1971-96**  
Source: Compiled by author from BC Gazette and Statistics Canada, various years



Note: Area annexed by municipal governments in the Vancouver and Victoria Census Metropolitan Areas not shown. Land area annexed not published by Statistics Canada or the BC Gazette prior to 1971.

counted separately. This is evident in the 1990 municipal boundary referendum in the greater Parksville area where the total vote was a clear majority in favour of annexation and yet the Minister did not approve it due to the lack of a majority in the unincorporated areas (Meligrana 2000b). In only two cases did the Ministry of Municipal Affairs force urban developments within an existing municipal government by way of annexation. During the early 1970s, the Minister of Municipal Affairs, James Lorimer, enlarged the municipal territory of the cities of Kamloops and Kelowna without formal local approval (Momer 1998).

### **Special Purpose Local Authorities: Improvement Districts/Community Planning Areas**

Limited local government achieved a foothold in British Columbia's unincorporated territory through the creation of public corporations to oversee the supply and distribution of water. In 1920 the Province amended the *Water Act* to provide for a public corporate body, known as an improvement district, to be run by elected trustees whose responsibility was to manage and distribute water to the property owners in the public interest (British Columbia 1956, 1957 and 1961, Cail 1974, 111-124). Improvement districts enjoyed the same statutory power as municipalities, but were originally restricted to a single function, waterworks (Figure 2).

The incorporation of improvement districts occurred through a petition of landowners to the Province and thus, the origins are clearly local. The first districts to incorporate were in the arid southern interior, particularly the Okanagan Valley, where water distribution was critical to the development of the tender fruit industry. Over twenty years of the legislative amendments permitting the formation of improvement districts, more than forty were incorporated (Figure 5). Improvement districts were seen by the Province and landowners to be a popular and effective way of delivering limited local government in the unincorporated areas.

In 1939, the Province amended the *Water Act* in order to expand the potential functions of improvement districts. The Act vaguely stated that an improvement district, where necessary and requested by landowners, could assume additional functions. Thus, improvement districts could assume control over functions such as construction of hospitals, fire protection, street lighting, sewerage, garbage collection and disposal, establishment of community halls, parks and playgrounds. All these were in addition to the original function of water works (*Water Act* 1948, c.361 s.62 (6)). By expanding the allowable functions the Province created an institutional entity that could facilitate the urbanization of the unincorporated areas through the provision of basic infrastructure services required by urban land uses. Thus, improvement districts, in some cases, represented the leading edge of the process of urbanization within the unincorporated areas, and an

improvement district may be regarded as transitional between rural and urban forms of local government.

The increased functions coupled with the post-war wave of urbanization resulted, in part, in the increase in the number of improvement districts from 66 in 1945 to more than 180 in 1955, an increase of 177 percent (Figure 5). The pace of incorporation continued unabated as a further 46 percent increase in the number of improvement districts was recorded between 1955 and 1975. By the early 1970s most improvement districts acquired functions beyond water works, for example, while the vast majority (90 percent) supplied domestic water, 50 percent offered fire protection, 30 percent street lights and 20 percent irrigation (British Columbia 1971, 32).

Concerns by the Province began to surface in the early 1970s with respect to the goals and objectives of improvement districts, especially where districts were becoming suburban neighbourhoods adjacent to existing urban municipalities (British Columbia 1978). As a result, the Province adopted a policy of refusing the incorporation of new districts and then went further to suggest that improvement districts at the margins of an urban municipality should be amalgamated to that municipality. The effect of the policy is evident in that the number of improvement districts appears to peak at just over 300 during the mid-1970s, and the trend since seems to suggest the continued existence of older districts (Figure 5). Moreover, the reason for creating improvement districts was likely curtailed by the establishment of regional districts during the late 1960s (see below). In some cases, some improvement districts reincorporated as municipal governments.

A more deliberate attempt to control urbanization adjacent to municipal boundaries came in the form of regulated areas (later termed community planning areas) (Figure 2), formed between 1946 and 1965 by the Regional Planning Division of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. Regulated Areas (1946-59) and Community Planning Areas (1959-65) were seen, by the Regional Planning Division, as a vehicle to provide provincial assistance in maintaining acceptable standards of urban development until they were considered ready for incorporation or could be annexed to an adjacent municipality. The establishment of regulated areas/community planning areas was at the request of local residents, or in some cases the Regional Planning Division, who sought a measure of control over urban growth, but were not willing, at the time, to apply for full municipal status.

Community planning areas had statutory authority over land use planning, similar to municipalities, but with the Minister of Municipal Affairs performing the duties of a locally elected council. These areas also provided local urban services such as ambulance, fire protection, garbage collection, and home nursing care. When the *National Building Code* was published in the early 1960s, the

Figure 5. Number of Improvement Districts, British Columbia, 1920-1990.



Source: Compiled by author from Annual Reports Various Years, Department of Lands & Forests, Ministry of the Environment, Department of Municipal Affairs

Province adopted it for all community planning areas, further adding to the Ministry's responsibilities regarding the growth management of community planning areas. Thus, standards for residential development in the unincorporated areas were apparently ensured without the institution of municipal government.

Overall, sixteen community planning areas were established in unincorporated areas with strong urban-fringe development trends. Development in these planning areas was substantial with a total of over \$9,000,000 (1959 dollars) invested in land improvements and almost 5,000 dwellings constructed between 1947 and 1959 (British Columbia 1961). Much of this total development (measured as dwellings constructed) was concentrated in the four key community planning areas of Nanaimo (1,330 dwellings), Kelowna (973 dwellings), Prince George (612 dwellings) and Kamloops (611 dwellings), adjacent to the four most populous municipalities in non-metropolitan British Columbia. The Province interpreted these trends to be a vote of confidence regarding the standards of such developments. The 1957 annual report of the Department of Municipal Affairs glowingly stated that “. . . thanks to the regulations, these developments have taken place in a much more orderly fashion and to a higher standard than almost certainly would have been the case without them” (British Columbia 1957).

The strong development trends in the community planning areas, however, become ever more of a burden for the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. The Ministry, for example, recognized that community planning area boundaries were rapidly becoming obsolete as development spilled out into areas beyond. Furthermore, the Ministry felt it was understaffed to cope with accelerating urban growth and sought a policy of annexing community planning areas to adjacent municipalities as a potential solution (British Columbia 1961). Yet, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs may have created its own problem by, on the one hand, facilitating fringe development through the institution of community planning areas and, on the other hand, by supporting a policy of not enacting annexation applications without local approval.

### **Provincial Ministries**

Beyond the jurisdiction of municipal governments, central agencies for local purposes play a critical role in the provision of the necessary infrastructure to allow for the conversion of rural land to urban uses (Figure 2). Specifically the legal subdivision of real property, sewerage and water works for unincorporated properties can be obtained from various provincial ministries. Thus, provincial policies and agencies play a major role as agents of change in the production of fringe developments within unincorporated territories.

In general, the subdivision of real property represents the first and critical step in the intensification of land use. It represents a public opportunity to

control fringe development and, in planning terms, to impose sound design criteria as negotiated between the public agency and the private developer. The Ministry of Transportation is the subdivision approving authority for most of British Columbia's unincorporated territories.

Sewage disposal within the unincorporated territories can be satisfied by either public or private systems. The private systems take the form of on-site septic systems under permits granted by the Ministry of Health on a case-by-case basis as per the soil and water conditions of the property, provided the sewerage discharge is less than 22,750 litres/day. The Ministry has no mandate to restrict the award of septic systems on a regional or area-wide basis, their spatial perspective being limited to the property line of each property. For volumes of wastewater discharge greater than 22,750 litres/day, the Ministry of Environment grants permits for the construction of packaged treatment plants under provisions of the *Waste Management Act*, also on a case-by-case basis. Thus, the Ministries of Environment and Health are inhibited from applying a broader regional planning approach to the allowance of private sewerage systems to control fringe development in the unincorporated areas.

There are also legal provisions for the operation of private water utilities within the unincorporated areas (British Columbia 1982). Private water utilities are usually corporations established, built and operated by the property developer selling metered water to land owners as obtained from local ground reserves. In other cases, some regional districts provide water to a specific unincorporated subdivision.

### **Regional Districts**

In 1965 the *Municipal Act* was amended to create a new form of local government, the regional district (Figure 2). By the early 1970s, regional districts covered almost the entire Province and were 'functional amalgamations' of health and other local governmental services, with each regional district having the flexibility to adopt certain voluntary functions tailored to specific regional needs. The two mandated functions were general planning and hospitals. The legislation creating regional districts, however, allowed municipalities to opt out of any regional district function including planning, but the municipalities could not opt out of membership with the regional district. Furthermore, in a dispute between the provincial government and one regional district, the planning function was removed from all regional districts in 1983 only to be reinstated with the passage of the *Growth Strategies Act* in 1995 (Smith 1986). Thus, between 1983 and 1995, there was no single corporate body within British Columbia that had regional planning powers. The regional district, therefore, represented a missed opportunity to provide meaningful growth management to the rural-urban fringe areas in British Columbia. Others have documented the 'gentle imposition'

of regional districts in greater detail (Collier 1972; Tennant and Zirnhelt 1972; Smith 1986).

The formation of regional districts, however, did provide a measure of local governance to the unincorporated areas, but it did so without disturbing the existing local governmental institutional structure. The operation, functions and boundaries of municipalities or improvement areas were essentially untouched by the implementation of regional districts. The frequency of annexations declined only slightly between the 1960s and 1970s, which suggests that the institution of regional districts had no immediate and measurable impact on the rate of municipal boundary extensions. This may call into question the ability of regional districts to effectively manage urban growth at the margins of existing municipalities.

Regional districts further subdivided the unincorporated areas into political spaces called electoral area (EA) (Figure 2). These are spatial units for the purpose of having rural representation on the regional district's board of directors. The members of regional districts are drawn from appointments by member municipal councils and through direct elections held in each electoral area. Regional districts, therefore, bring together elected representatives of the urban municipalities and rural unincorporated areas into one governmental institution. Thus, in geographic scope the regional districts tend to mirror the county system of southern Ontario, but the regional district diverges importantly from the Ontario county model by bringing together, not separating, rural and urban interests in the governance of the region.

Electoral areas represent a new form of government in the unincorporated territories, but without the formal, incorporated status of a municipality and the corresponding powers, responsibilities and administrative structures. In a sense their operation within the regional district is much like that of a ward within a municipality. However, EAs did capture rural areas and, by virtue of electoral status alone, began to develop their own political identities. This changed the dynamics of municipal annexations. Any municipality's attempt at annexation would be at the expense of an electoral area and may threaten the political life of the electoral area and its director. As a local political institution, the area director could play an important role in discouraging any expansionary visions of an urban municipality. By the late 1980s there were many electoral areas concerned about annexation. These EAs developed their own official community plans (OCP), suggesting that they had a clear vision of planning and future developments. In general, official community plans are associated with incorporated areas, i.e., villages, towns and cities, which are required by law to prepare and adopt an OCP. Regional districts, however, can prepare official community plans for their unincorporated territories although they are not legally obliged to do so.

Most electoral areas are trying to protect a 'rural lifestyle' and would probably resist any annexation to a municipality. The strategies of resistance to annexation seem either to involve incorporation as a municipality, the option selected by Metchosin, located near the city of Victoria, or to put up an intensive political fight to maintain the territorial status quo. Within some regional districts, such as the Sunshine Coast, the electoral areas also represent the building blocks to more fundamental local government reorganization where boundaries of electoral areas form the basis of various proposals for annexation and incorporation of new municipalities. In this way the EAs represent the 'leading edge' of urbanization, analogous to the earlier improvement districts and community planning areas noted above.

### **Agricultural Land Commission**

With the election of the New Democratic Party in 1972, fundamental changes occurred to the provincial approach to regional planning. Among the most notable was the creation of the Agricultural Land Reserve and the Agricultural Land Commission. The *Agricultural Land Commission Act* created and empowered the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC) to establish regulations and policies with respect to lands classified as Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) (Figure 2). The Commission's broad policy objective is to preserve the Province's agricultural land base and to encourage agricultural activities undertaken within this land base, implying that it has broad powers with respect to land uses and developments undertaken within the ALR. Owners of property within the ALR must apply to the ALC to have their lands excluded from the agricultural land reserve, to subdivide their land, or to undertake non-farm land uses (*Agricultural Land Commission Act*, R.S.B.C. 1979). Thus, the ALC is a kind of single purpose planning board or municipal board as seen more formally in Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Nova Scotia.

Since a significant amount of prime agricultural land within the Province is also adjacent to urban areas, the ALC has been active in establishing ways to minimize or avoid the consequences of urban development upon the potential agricultural activities with the ALR. With respect to annexation, the ALC is reluctant to see agricultural land currently within unincorporated areas fall within municipal jurisdiction. Although the change in jurisdiction does not alter the power of the commission under the *Agricultural Land Commission Act*, it does make the land vulnerable to municipal regulations that may, directly or indirectly, restrict certain agricultural activities. Further, the incorporation of agricultural land may create an environment of expectation that the land is but one step closer to exclusion. This eventually would hamper the encouragement of farming within the ALR.

For municipal governments, the ALR can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the establishment of the ALR in 1973 may have captured a significant amount of municipal territory, thus removing it from potential urban development and from generating municipal tax revenue. In compensation, a municipality may seek to annex other lands. On the other hand, the ALR, in theory, should prevent fringe development, thus removing the need for annexation to control 'unwanted' developments.

The activities of the ALC seem to be evolving from mere guardians of agricultural lands to important proponents of more sophisticated planning for the use of both rural and urban lands. Recent legislative changes to the *Agricultural Land Commission Act*, related legislation, policy statements, and symposiums reveal insights and trends regarding the ALC's position on the relationship between the ALR and urban development pressures. The ALC cites the *Agricultural Land Commission Amendment Act*, August 1994, as providing a framework that improves the working relationship between local governments and the ALC. The Act provides for the delegation to municipal governments of some decision-making powers regarding the ALR. This could be done if a municipality has in place a formal agricultural or rural plan. Furthermore, changes to the *Municipal Act* now require official community plans to be forwarded to the ALC for comments prior to adoption. In the past this was done informally.

As an agency of the central state, the Agricultural Land Commission has recently attempted to influence the policy debate regarding fringe developments. Two examples illustrate this point. One, the proximity and the potential interrelationships between farm and non-farm uses are a topic of the ALC's manual, *Landscape Buffer Specifications* (Agricultural Land Commission 1993a). Two, the ALC (1993b) sponsored a symposium entitled *Urban Growth and The Agricultural Land Reserve: Up not Out* in 1993. This likely contributed to the Province's new *Growth Strategies Act* which finally defined urban sprawl and fringe development in a rather sophisticated manner, yet the local government system was left unchanged, perhaps ensuring that fringe development will continue in the unincorporated areas (Meligrana 2000a).

## **Conclusion**

The Province's design and adaptation of local, regional and provincial agencies to govern fringe developments in its unincorporated territory is the focus of this paper. Overall, a coordinated governance structure informed by a sound planning vision was absent from the history of various experiments in special purpose local governments, the classification of municipal governments, the policies and regulations regarding annexation, the introduction of regional districts, and the operation of key provincial ministries. Each of the above governance institutions had varying roles, abilities, and spatial jurisdictions to facilitate, influence and

control fringe developments occurring within the unincorporated areas. In short, each institutional structure had a different governance history and mandate over such areas. What is interesting is not the lack of governance institutions in the unincorporated areas, but how such institutions worked, to a degree, at “cross-purposes” in an attempt to manage the urban fringe.

The study has demonstrated that the Province is not a homogeneous political entity, but one that is fragmented among several central agencies for local purposes. Urbanization of the unincorporated areas was facilitated by the actions of several Ministries. Municipal Affairs has been involved in establishing community planning areas, allowancing private water utilities and increasing the urban functions of improvement districts. The Ministry of Transportation has had jurisdiction over the subdivision of real property, and the ministries of Health and the Environment have had authority over private sewerage systems. Thus the collective action of various provincial agencies for local purposes provided the regulatory environment for urbanization to take place within the unincorporated territories.

The Province never established a coherent planning vision regarding the form and governance of fringe growth in unincorporated territories. The closest thing to such a vision was the steadfast positions of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs that municipal government should be responsible for urban areas and that rural areas should remain unincorporated. Provincial municipal classifications, laws, and policies supported this rural-urban territorial division. The legal conception of the community planning areas and the improvement districts were developed as interim local government agencies to assist urban development until full municipal status was necessary. These institutions represented a hybrid form of governmental agencies for local purposes and single purpose local government agencies having both provincial and local representation. The rural identification with the electoral area, the improvement districts, or community planning areas, as a unit of government suggests that there is a need for a new type of municipality in British Columbia, one that can bridge the needs of an environment that is neither rural nor urban. However, this type of reform of the *Municipal Act* has not taken place, and the traditional method of annexation to solve fringe development continues.

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