RDOS CELEBRATING 50th ANNIVERSARY IN 2016

Local Government is the closest form of government to the people served. Beginning in 1966 the Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen (RDOS) has provided rural residents with an effective form of local government, while also representing municipal residents on rural issues.

The RDOS is celebrating its 50th anniversary on March 4, 2016. To celebrate this significant milestone, the RDOS has been planning commemorative events to honour those elected officials who have assumed a role at the RDOS Board table over the past 50 years, as well as to showcase some of the larger projects, accomplishments and initiatives which have been achieved at the RDOS over the years.

History is an important building block to culture and community. The RDOS 50th anniversary is a collaborative effort to capture and record some of the history of the RDOS local government and to showcase the important historical role the RDOS has played to its citizens. Through the telling of stories of past and current Directors and senior staff, citizens will begin to see the impacts of how the hard work and commitment to local government has benefitted citizens in our communities.

Some initiatives to celebrate the anniversary during 2016 are:
- A 50th Anniversary page has been added to the RDOS website.
- A series of YouTube videos have been produced featuring interviews with past and present Directors and senior staff covering topics from Regional Thinking, Highlights and Achievement of the past 50 years, and the Importance of the RDOS.
- A series of articles will be written about the history of the RDOS which are sure to unveil accomplishments of past Directors as well as many funny and fascinating stories. These articles will also serve to educate the public on Regional District services and draw a correlation between the decision making of the board (past and present) to the benefits realized in each community.
- Static and interactive displays will be set up in participating member municipalities and electoral areas at heritage venues, fairs and markets throughout 2016.
- Staff are proud to be working with the Okanagan Historical Society on articles about the Regional District for the society’s 2016 publication.

We want to hear from you! If you are interested in learning more about the RDOS 50th Anniversary celebrations, or if you or someone you know was a past Director or past staff member or if you have an interesting historical story about the Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen we want to hear from you!

Contact our office at 250-492-0237 or email info@rdos.bc.ca.

Bill Bush Longest Serving Board Member

William John “Bill” Bush was elected to the RDOS as the Electoral Area “B” Director (Cawston) in 1980. He served in this position for 20 years. Bush was the longest serving Electoral Area Director in the history of the RDOS. During Bush’s tenure he served as the Vice-Chair of the RDOS Board and was the Chairman of the Okanagan Similkameen Regional Hospital District.

Bush was referred to by his fellow Directors and constituents as a “Gentle Giant”. He was a big man in stature who was quiet and kind. Bill’s philosophy on the Board was to keep things simple and keep taxes low. If it wasn’t broken, don’t try to fix it.

Bush proudly served as the Chairman for the committee that led to the building of the South Okanagan-Similkameen Health Centre in Keremeos, BC. A plaque in the Health Centre foyer reads: To the Memory of William John (Bill) Bush, Okanagan Similkameen Hospital Chairman. Bill served his constituents with kindness, wisdom, integrity, independence and reason throughout his 20 years of Public Service.
In 1950, the south Okanagan was still very much an agricultural community dominated by the fruit orchards planted a generation earlier. The opening of the Hope-Princeton highway the year earlier, a boon for fruit growers of the Hope-Princeton highway the area into a tourism destination and infrastructure, a push for greater control and planning began to take shape. Penticton was at the forefront of this movement, pressing other communities such as Oliver, Summerland, Peachland and Vernon to share in the estimated $8,000 cost of hiring a planner in 1959 to assist with orderly development. The City also began to lobby the provincial government to help control development in the “unorganised areas” outside of municipal boundaries through the creation of a Regional Planning Board, similar to the ones then operating in Victoria and Vancouver.

The province, and particularly its Minister of Municipal Affairs, Dan Campbell, was very sympathetic to these pleas and a South Okanagan Regional Planning Board was eventually created in July of 1963. Penticton Mayor Maurice Finnerty, who had “spearheaded the drive for a regional planning board in this area” was appointed as the City’s representative and subsequently elected as Chair of the Board by his peers. Finnerty had high hopes for the Board, declaring “this is an important step for Penticton and the whole of the south Okanagan — and the most economical and efficient method of obtaining planning for the future to avoid the mistakes of the past.”

In a surprise move, however, Northe would resign his position a mere five months later in order to take a planning position with the Capital Regional District. In his resignation letter he cited the “apparent reluctance” on the part of much of the rural areas to accept planning as a policy.

Appointed as the Regional District’s first “Secretary-Treasurer” (a term used to describe what is now commonly known as a CAO), Gerard had served in similar positions with the municipalities of Cartier and St. Francis Xavier (adjacent to Winnipeg) between 1949 and 1963, and as Clerk for the Village of Warfield (West Kootenay) between 1963-1967.

In 1963, the south Okanagan unprepared for this change, many local communities — and Penticton in particular — found themselves grappling with subdivisions, over which they had little control, popping up “like toposy” on their boundaries. Aghast at the unsightly nature of some of these developments, and the demands of new residents for municipal services and infrastructure, a push for greater control and planning began to take shape.

Penticton Regional Planning Board was eventually created in July of 1963. Penticton Mayor Maurice Finnerty, who had “spearheaded the drive for a regional planning board in this area” was appointed as the City’s representative and subsequently elected as Chair of the Board by his peers. Finnerty had high hopes for the Board, declaring “this is an important step for Penticton and the whole of the south Okanagan — and the most economical and efficient method of obtaining planning for the future to avoid the mistakes of the past.”
Penticton Plays Roll in Bringing Regional Planning to South Okanagan

The outsized role that Penticton played in bringing regional planning to the south Okanagan would, however, prove to be a double-edged sword. Concerned about the clout that its larger southern neighbour would wield on the Board, Summerland would not participate until 1965. When the District did finally join, the editorial page of the Penticton Herald paid it a back-handed compliment, proclaiming the move to be “a repudiation of the narrowly-insular attitude that has held back wise and beneficial progress in Summerland and elsewhere in the past.”

Maurice Finnerty, City of Penticton Mayor 1963. — “Penticton Herald archive photo”

The preparation of the Plan would, remarkably, be completed within less than 9 months, but as Northey recalls, he was working 14 days including weekends trying to run the organisation and do planning work at the same time. In addition to these resource issues, the drafting of the Plan had highlighted a number of limitations of the Regional Planning Board model.

Whenever a development problem arose in a municipality, Northey was expected to stop all other work and respond. As a result, he estimated that 60% of his time was devoted to Penticton with the remainder to Oliver and Osoyoos. Whatever was left (if anything) could then be spent on the “unorganised areas”. Also problematic was that the Regional Planning Board was an advisory body and none of its member municipalities, including the provincial government which was responsible for the “unorganised areas”, were obliged to follow its recommendations.

This, seemingly, ran counter to one of the main reasons why the Board had been created, which was to help control development outside of the municipal areas.

Finally, composition of the Board was dominated by appointees from the municipalities, all of whom were popularly elected councillors. Conversely, the province had appointed a bureaucrat and a resident of Kaleden to represent the “unorganised areas” — which included communities as diverse as Okanagan Falls, Naramata, the West Bench and the orchard lands between Oliver and Osoyoos.

Fortunately, the provincial government recognised these shortcomings and was not particularly happy with this situation either, especially when residents of an “unorganised area” became unhappy with a land use decision and blamed the province of interference and high-handedness.

Wishing to free itself of this burden, the province began to explore options for letting residents in the “unorganised areas” manage and direct their own land use planning efforts.

At a conference organized by the Board in early 1965, Minister Campbell let slip the broad outlines of his preferred solution — the Regional District system.

Described as a form of “Co-operative Government”, municipal governments, improvement districts and the “unorganized areas” would be allowed to create their own solutions to a service problem (i.e. the provision of water, sewer, hospitals, policing or fire protection) and, in particular, land use planning.

Maurice Finnerty, South Okanagan Regional Planning Board Chair

“We look with some pride on the fact that, in the race between the Central Okanagan and the South Okanagan to have the first Regional Planning Area formed, that, by the Grace of God we won down here!”

www.rdos.bc.ca

Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen serving the citizens of the Okanagan-Similkameen since 1966.
In the Beginning Regional Thinking Prevails 1965-1966

Within weeks of Campbell's announcement, legislation allowing for the creation of Regional District was introduced and talk quickly moved to the formation of a South Okanagan Regional District. The province had come to the conclusion that, outside of Vancouver and Victoria, Regional Districts would be based upon populations of 30,000 persons, so this ruled out the creation of a single Okanagan board (for the time being). A Steering Committee with municipal representatives lead by Mayor Finnerty and members appointed by the Minister for the unorganised areas was quickly formed and set about finding common ground in order that Mayor Finnerty played down the setback noting, correctly, that it was the best of a bad lot. The Minister for the Regional District was introduced allowing for the creation of a single Okanagan Regional District. It is my intention to recomm

Director questions could, on occasion, be a logistical nightmare. Such as Oliver, Osoyoos, Keremeos and Princeton. In era before the internet and "cloud computing," organising meetings in different communities and anticipating what may be needed to address Director questions could, on occasion, be a logistical nightmare. To honour Alex Gough's election as the first RDOS Chair, the Village of Oliver Council resolved to present the Regional District with its first gavel (pictured is Gough at left receiving the gavel from then Oliver Mayor Richard Topping at right). Over the past 50 years, the gavel has been used at hundreds of meetings, public hearings and other events. During one particularly heated public hearing to do with the Blackwell Stores case in Naramata, Board Chairman Roger Mayer (Hedley/Keremeos) shattered the gavel in an attempt to regain order. Fortunately, the damage was not irreparable, the gavel was repaired and continues to be used to this day.

The election of Alex Gough, (Village of Oliver) as Chair and Bill Barkwill (District of Summerland) as Vice Chair reflected a concern about the suitability of the Minister's appointees for the "unorganised areas" filling executive positions as well as their experience (and lack thereof) with running a local government.

Electoral Area “A” (Osoyoos Rural) Directors 1966 – Present

Jack Hulton
Ron Klyne
Al Whitmore
Sebastian Schmidt
Ted Takacs
Sue Whittaker
Vince Fourt
John Piazza
Eike Scheffler
Mark Pendergraft

Penticton Herald Photo from April 23, 1990 issue. ~“Penticton Herald archive photo”
**Growing Pains for the RDOS**

Under Minister Campbell’s vision of regional districts, the province would play an oversight role, but would not be directly involved in managing local affairs. As former Chair Duncan McDougall (Naramata) recalled years later, this caused a significant amount of confusion and alarm in the area — resulting in the RDOS being nicknamed the “the monster” — as no one really understood what its purpose was or what it might do; such as take over the school and irrigation districts or start making lots of rules.

Unsure of Regional District priorities, a number of communities attempted to abandon the ship. In 1968, Howard Patton (OK Falls) declared himself to be in disagreement with the Board on almost every issue and advocated opting out “while we can”. Shortly thereafter, a proposal to incorporate Okanagan Falls as a Village was floated, but quickly rejected by residents (not for the last time), prompting Patton to resign from the Board due to “abnormal frustration”.

Less than a year after its creation, Summerland Council debated the benefits (if any) being provided by the Regional District, prompting Director Barkwill (Summerland) to declare the organisation to be a “political football” created by the province as a way to punt contentious issues back onto communities.

Attempts to have Naramata join the planning service would remain unfilled until 1971, while even residents of Coalmont and Tulameen attempted to secede from the RDOS over concerns that zoning and building inspection services were about to be imposed. These skirmishes were, however, minor in comparison with the dispute that would erupt between the RDOS and Osoyoos over a provincial decision to build a new hospital in the Village of Oliver.

Hired within months of each other in 1970, Jim Rheaume (left) as the Chief Administrator and Harold Thomson (right) as the Planning Director would, together, guide the expansion of the Regional District as an organisation over the next 20 years. A former accountant with Revenue Canada, when Rheaume was hired, “nobody knew what a regional district was”, while the number of staff totalled 7 (mostly in the planning department), and the services provided even less.

For Thomson, who had previously been a Deputy Director of the Medicine Hat Regional Planning Commission, significant time was being spent on providing planning services to the municipalities while zoning in rural areas was very limited. By the time of their retirements in 1988-89, the number of services had expanded to over 20 as had the number of staff, the annual budget had expanded from $137,000 to $5.6 million, while zoning had been introduced into most Electoral Areas while the RDOS continued to provide planning services to all of its member municipalities.
Within a month of the first Board meeting in 1966, Minister Campbell gave regional districts the authority to levy taxes for hospital construction. This was gladly embraced by the RDOS as the Penticton Hospital Society was seeking funding help for the construction of a new facility. Unbeknownst to the Board, its “Umbrella Plan” — raising finances for the four hospitals in the region — rekindled a simmering dispute between the Villages of Oliver and Osoyoos that would become the first major political crisis to test the Board. At issue was a decision to replace the aging and undersized St. Martin’s Hospital in Oliver with a new, larger facility on the east side of town. Osoyoos residents believed their community was the better location for the new hospital and had already appealed the decisions of the local Hospital Society and Minister of Health to construct the hospital in Oliver. Before the Regional District could raise taxes to fund the region’s hospitals, it had to obtain public consent through a referendum. Osoyoos forces quickly mobilized in the hopes of defeating the proposed spending measure in the referendum, thereby denying Oliver the financing needed to build the new hospital and, hopefully, re-open the debate about its location. When this failed — the referendum passed with 75% support across the region, but only 15% in Osoyoos — and the Regional District was finally able (after much legal and political wrangling between the two communities) to issue a tender for the project in May of 1971, Director Jack Shaw (Village of Osoyoos) and Director Sebastian Schmidt (Osoyoos Rural) stormed out of the meeting. It would be 7 months before Director Shaw ended his boycott of the Regional District, while Director Schmidt, in a parting shot after deciding not to run again in the 1972 election, derided the political leadership of the RDOS to visiting BC Liberal Party leader David Anderson, and promptly leaked his conversation to the Osoyoos Times newspaper. Upon hearing of Director Schmidt’s remarks, RDOS Chair Phil Farmer (OK Falls), proclaimed it to be “one of the most embarrassing moments of my life”. In a sign of support for ably guiding the Regional District through the turmoil of the hospital dispute, the Board passed a motion of confidence in Farmer. To this day, the hospital dispute is still raised by “old-timers” when a joint project between Oliver and Osoyoos is being proposed by the Regional District.

Although not the first Chair of the RDOS, Phil Farmer (Okanagan Falls/Kaleden) was certainly one of the more prominent and helped steer the Regional District through its tumultuous early years including the Oliver-Osoyoos Hospital dispute. First elected in a 1968 by-election, Farmer was elevated to the position of Chair by his peers mere months later following the retirement of Bill Barkwill (Summerland) and was the first Electoral Area Director to fill the position. Upon becoming Chair, Farmer addressed his fellow directors, stating: “It disturbs me that the RDOS has been accused in the newspapers of vacillation, childishness, stupidity and even amateurishness. In the next two years I hope we can set some targets and get some things done.” “Praised for his leadership, chided for his brusque manner and cited for his terse expression” by his peers on his retirement, all agreed there was never any doubt about where Farmer stood on an issue. This esteem would lead to Farmer being appointed Chair of a Commission established by the provincial government in 1977 to examine the role of regional districts (known informally as the “Farmer Commission”). Regional district thinking must not be directed all to the present but mainly to the long term — 25, 50 or 100 years hence.

**Twin Lakes Saga**

Tensions also flared at this time between the RDOS and provincial government over authority for making land use decisions. Despite the stated desire of Minister Campbell to introduce local democracy to the “unorganized areas”, his acceptance of local politics over authority for making land use decisions was sometimes not as apparent as with an ambitious proposal by Gabriola Wildwood Farmer the better part of the 2500 lot subdivision at Twin Lakes (located between Kaleden and Keremeos on Highway 3A) in 1970. Despite having no proof of there being enough water to support such a subdivision, the developer insisted that the Regional District make changes to the new zoning bylaw it was drafting for Electoral Area “D” (which included Twin Lakes as well as Okanagan Falls and Kaleden) to accommodate the subdivision. The Board was of a different opinion and refused the proposal pending the completion of the new zoning bylaw. Rather than abide by the decision of locally elected representatives, the developer plead his case directly to Minister Campbell. At this time, the Regional District could not adopt its own bylaws until they had been approved by the Minister and, amazingly, the Minister ordered the RDOS to designate the area around Twin Lakes as a “development area” in the new zoning bylaw before he would approve it, despite the 4000 lot subdivision having not yet proven water. To the Board, this was a direct attack on their legitimacy and a rejection of the hundreds of hours of community and staff input into the drafting of the new zoning bylaw. If the Minister was prepared to take such actions, the Board wondered if “it might now be better to slowly cut back both the activities and the staff of the planning department” if Campbell was going to be doing the planning work of the RDOS. To its credit, the Board remained resolute and asked the Minister to approve the bylaw without any changes. Oddly, two months later, and “without debate or explanation of the change in policy”, the Board backed down and designated the area around Twin Lakes as suitable for future development, thereby allowing the new zoning bylaw to be adopted. Confident of his prospects, the developer resubmitted the same 4000 lot proposal early in 1972, but now, out from under the Minister’s thumb, the Board refused the rezoning again due to its previously stated concerns about water and environmental impacts.

**PUBLIC HEARING HELD IN THE EARLY 1970’s**

John Cornelissen, the planner tasked with drafting the new zoning bylaw for Electoral Area “D” and explaining it at the public hearing recalls the developer hiring a number of people to attend the hearing and directing them to start shouting “anytime Cornelissen tries to talk”. It would take Chair Phil Farmer the better part of the evening to get things under control and successfully conclude the hearing.

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**Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen serving the citizens of the Okanagan-Similkameen since 1966.**

- **South Okanagan Similkameen Regional Hospital**

For more information, visit [www.rdos.bc.ca](http://www.rdos.bc.ca)
The Agricultural Land Reserve

While the Board would resist seemingly arbitrary interferences by the Minister in land use planning, it fully embraced other provincial directives, such as the introduction of the "land freeze" in December of 1972. Lacking local expertise, the province enlisted regional districts to assist with establishing the boundaries of the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) in 1973 as, in the case of the RDOS, significant mapping of the rural areas had already been undertaken as the first electoral area zoning bylaws were being prepared.

As Gord Davidson, the Regional District's draftsman and principal map maker, recalled years later, the announcement of the ALR, "set off a panic alarm that immediately required not only mapping for the whole RDOS, but mapping [which showed] ALR boundaries". For Jim Rheamue, there was no point in fighting the province on the matter, and when the Ministry announced it was prepared to pay staff over-time to complete the mapping, the race was on!

All hands were called on deck, with Planning Director Harold Thomson, Planners John Cornilsson and Ian Birds and Davidson working nights and weekends in the hopes of being the first regional district in the province to complete the task. The staff received a major assist in this quest from Gary Runka, who had prepared the soil classifications of the Okanagan Valley for the Canada Land Inventory (CLI) project and provided these to the RDOS.

The implementing bylaw received its first three readings on September 18, 1973, went to public hearing that same day and was formally adopted by the Board a mere two days later. Staff promptly submitted the necessary paperwork to the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC), and thus became the first regional district in the province to complete the task, edging out the North Okanagan Regional District by only a single day. This victory, however, was bittersweet, as being first was certainly a feather in the cap for both the Board and staff, but, as Davidson ruefully conceded, the RDOS now found itself "suddenly inundated with appeals ... for exclusions, subdivisions and non-farm uses" in the ALR, which now took a significant amount of staff and Board time to deal with.

Clouds of Smoke!

Directors “are supposed to be concerned with health”.  
- Richard Topping, Oliver Mayor

What is the biggest change between Board meetings held in the early years of the Regional District versus current meetings? Directors are no longer hidden from each other behind clouds of smoke! The notion that one shouldn't smoke at the workplace has been as foreign to Directors in the 1960s as the smartphone.

Yet, there were those on the Board who challenged this state-of-affairs, sometimes with comical outcomes. Take a motion to prohibit smoking during Board meetings that was moved in 1973. It was defeated when the Chair, Phil Farmer, a smoker, failed to call a vote. Oliver Mayor, Richard Topping, then moved a similar motion during the meeting of the Hospital District, pointing out that directors "are supposed to be concerned with health".

Rural Director Cliff Devine (Cawston) countered with a suggestion that non-smoking directors "should be prohibited from drinking at the dinner which preceded each regional district meeting." With that, Topping's motion failed.
The Environment

RDOS Services Expanding

The outbreak of fires at regional district operated dumps was a common occurrence in the early 1970s, but with the switch to “sanitary landfills” and more modern practices, these events were thought to be a thing of the past. It was with some surprise that a fire was discovered to have broken out underground at Campbell Mountain in the late 1980s. It would take 10 years before it was finally brought under control so that the North Ravine section of the site could be shut down in 1998.

One of the first major studies completed by the Regional District related to the pending closure of the Carmi Avenue landfill in Penticton (which was reaching capacity), and the ongoing concern about illegal dumping in the rural areas. The study recommended the creation of a new “sanitary landfill” — which would replace the more traditional “dump” where garbage was regularly burned — in the West Bench which would be operated by the City and serving residents of Penticton, West Bench, Naramata, Kaleden, Okanagan Falls and Skaha Estates. Vociferously opposed by residents in the West Bench, an alternate site at Campbell Mountain was found and began operations on Canada Day 1972. 18 months later, Directors were shocked to hear that 10% of the landfill had already been used, thereby cutting the anticipated lifespan of the site from 30 years down to only 15. Fingers were quickly pointed, with Penticton Councillor, Gordon Butterfield, suggesting that, as site was not being operated properly by the Regional District “it will not last another 10 years;” and that Okanagan Falls needed to start dealing with its own trash.

The upside to this quarrel was that it restarted a discussion at the Board table about the need to increase recycling as a way to prolong the life of Campbell Mountain. Within a decade, a recycling program had been created which encompassed paper, glass and metal recycling and, in later years, would be expanded to include curbside recycling program now found in most of the Electoral Areas. At this time, the RDOS also began to take a keen interest in the health of the valley’s local lake system.

Through its participation in the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB), the Regional District tackled such issues as the use of detergents and their high levels of phosphate, pesticides such as 2,4-D (an ingredient in “Agent Orange”) and the choking effect of Eurasian Milfoil. The Board’s biggest undertaking, however, and one that reflected the RDOS’s increasing maturity and capabilities, was the construction of a community sewer system in Okanagan Falls. A large amount of clay in the soil was claimed to be impeding the effectiveness of septic fields in the townsite, thereby jeopardizing wells and the river channel. In response, the OBWB had recommended the construction of a community sewer system and was prepared to provide funding, but an important decision needed to be made about whether to discharge treated water back into river system or employ drying lagoons and spray irrigation. This discussion occurred against the backdrop of a grassroots protest by the group No Effluent Wanted (N.E.W.) who represented individuals downstream of Penticton opposed to the city’s decision to pump its treated sewage back into the lake system. To resolve the issue, a referendum was held in Okanagan Falls in June of 1977, to which 73% of voters supported discharge by a lagoon pond.

In an odd twist, the filtration pond established to handle the discharge from the sewer plant failed, resulting in the discharge of a significant volume of nutrient rich water into a nearby kettle (a geological form that take the shape of a bowl) but, instead of being an environmental catastrophe, turned out to be a bonanza for local wildlife. Due to the high level of nutrients, toads and other small creatures were using the kettle, promoting the RDOS to acquire the land and the Ministry of Environment to press for its preservation.
The resulting showdown between the Board and local First Nations over this issue witnessed the protesting of a Board meeting by 30-40 individuals (an almost unprecedented event in the 50 year history of the organisation), various legal proceedings and a direct appeal to the Minister of Municipal Affairs, Bill Vander Zalm, to stop the rezoning.

To the surprise of the Regional District, this is precisely what the Minister did on February 14, 1980. Vander Zalm suggested, however, that he would reconsider the bylaw if it was modified. So, a revised proposal was prepared by staff and unanimously approved by the Board only months later and sent back to the Minister for his approval — which would never be received. Ernie Smith died in August of 1980 and the Regional District finally abandoned the bylaw in December of 1983 when it became clear the province was not going to approve the spa (and had been attempting to negotiate a purchase of the site from the Smith family in the interim).

In the intervening 35 years, relations between the Regional District and local First Nations Bands have markedly improved. In the 1990s, all four Bands were offered seats on every Regional District Committee in order to provide them with an opportunity to provide input on the development of RDOS policies. More recently, the Regional District has entered into a formal Protocol Agreement with local Bands to improve consultation and collaboration.

The idea of Spotted Lake being turned into a commercial spa would have been totally unfeasible if it had not been for the construction of Richter Pass section of Highway 3A in 1965, which brought vehicle traffic within site of the lake for the first time. The transformative nature of a new highway was not lost on the Town of Princeton, which had benefited immensely from the completion of the Hope-Princeton Highway in 1949 and the increase in vehicle traffic patronizing its commercial businesses. So, when the provincial government announced in the 1977 Throne Speech that it would be allocating funds for the construction of a new highway through the Coquihalla Pass, the Town commenced a vigorous lobbying campaign opposing the project.

Princeton Mayor Dave Brown was concerned that his community would become neglected and the costs of snow removal (which had led the CPR to abandon its rail line through the Pass) would be enormous, while Penticton Mayor Al Kenyon declared “I can’t understand why we need another two or three lanes going up the Coquihalla to nowhere.”

In this struggle, the Similkameen and Okanagan directors were united and tasked Regional District planning staff to put forward arguments against the project and when this failed, to make the case for the construction of a connector that would continue to direct traffic towards the south Okanagan.

Local MLA Jim Hewitt, by then a Cabinet Minister but also a former Regional District Director (Penticton) remembers the lobbying which took place over this issue and its influence on Cabinet’s subsequent decision to have the connector come out south of Kelowna so that vehicle traffic might still be induced to head towards Peachland, Summerland, Penticton and Osoyoos.
RDOS Spearheads the Introduction of 911 Emergency Call System

The Blackwell Stores

MLA backs Naramata’s call for help from NDP

The cost of establishing and then running such a service was prohibitive. Only after Kelowna, the largest urban centre in the Valley had established its own 911 service and agreed to extend it to the south Okanagan.

would the issue be taken up again by the RDOS. Despite the clear benefits of the service today, its introduction was far from assured in the late 1980s, with some communities expressing concern about the cost (even though this was to be defrayed somewhat by Kelowna). Resolving these concerns was tailor made to the regional approach to governance offered by the Regional District.

A “911” sub-committee of the Board was created with Director Bob Shewfelt (District of Summerland), an ambulance driver and one of the most vocal proponents of the 911 service, as its Chair.

When Penticton and Osoyoos resolved to hold referenda on the matter in conjunction with the electoral areas (which were legally required to do so), Shewfelt declared a rejection of the service “would turn the South Okanagan into the Lower Slobovia of Dogpatch of the area”. He further pointed out that 80% of the province already had the service and tourists would be coming here expecting it to work when they dialed the numbers.

Shewfelt kept up his campaign to have all the communities support the program, which was overwhelmingly supported by residents in the end. 25 years later, the 911 service handles over 30,000 calls from within the RDOS and is an asset for the community (as it is for other communities across the province).

In the mid-1990s, the Regional District would confront an emergency of a different sort. In the collective memory of those who have worked or served at the Regional District over the past 50 years, the “Blackwell Stores case” is almost singularly unique in terms of its impact upon the organisation. Called the longest arbitration case in Canadian history at the time of its resolution in January 1999, at issue was a decision by the Regional District Board to do what was right and step into the breach created by the NID when no else would.

This decision resulted in thousands of staff hours being expended on the arbitration case over a four year period; hours that would have been subsidized by the other communities that comprise the Regional District, and who had to forgo some of their own projects due to staff resources being committed to the Blackwell case. For Doug Leahy, Chief Financial Officer at the time, the Blackwell case was the most significant event he has experienced in a 30 year career in local government, and is also one of the finest moments of the RDOS applying a regional perspective to resolve a local problem. Possibly not as well known is that, by taking over for the NID, the Regional District was able to successfully lobby the provincial government for a significant contribution to the construction of a new water system for Naramata, which ended an era of boil water advisories in the community.

estimated $2.4 million, bringing the grand total to $5.2 million. Undoubtedly, these were and continue to be controversial costs, however, behind the numbers stands the decision by the Regional District Board to do what was right and step into the breach created by the NID when no else would.

RDOS Chair
C. W. Willis
1992 ~ 1994

The idea of such a number being available to residents had been discussed as early as 1977 following the installation of an electronic exchange in Okanagan Falls and planned upgrades in Penticton that would pave the way for “the new push button way of placing calls”. The cost of establishing and then running such a service was prohibitive. Only after Kelowna, the largest urban centre in the Valley had established its own 911 service and agreed to extend it to the south Okanagan.

So as to spearhead the introduction of the 911 Emergency Call System in 1989. The development department initially undertook the success of contract suit for $1.5 million, but legal costs could potentially soar to $4 million. Divided between approximately 40 municipalities in the Okanagan, the cost of the suit will be a heavy burden to bear in a community with so many services being on fixed incomes.

Thorp says he “is confident the government will have it work when they expect it to work, and step into the breach created by the NID when no else would.”

“The idea of such a number being available to residents had been discussed as early as 1977 following the installation of an electronic exchange in Okanagan Falls and planned upgrades in Penticton that would pave the way for “the new push button way of placing calls”. The cost of establishing and then running such a service was prohibitive. Only after Kelowna, the largest urban centre in the Valley had established its own 911 service and agreed to extend it to the south Okanagan.”
While the Regional District must defend itself when legal actions are brought against it, the Board is also regularly called upon to uphold its own bylaws. Usually, this involves minor building violations, resulting in a notice on title and which are eventually resolved without much drama. Then there are the other types of infractions, the ones that attract an unusual amount of public interest and can, on occasion, make provincial and sometimes even national headlines.

There have been two of these latter types of enforcement over the past 50 years, the first of which involved a proposed “Arabian-themed” amusement park on Rattlesnake Island, which is situated at the northern extremity of the RDOS across Okanagan Lake from Peachland. In what seems like a far-fetched plan today but seemingly made economic sense in the early 1970s, access to the amusement park was to be via ferries running from Kelowna, Peachland and Penticton.

The promoter, Eddie Haymour, showed up to the public hearing for the first Electoral Area “E” (Naramata) Zoning Bylaw in 1971, requesting the zoning of his island be changed to allow for amusement parks, but his request was not supported by the Board. Inexplicably, Haymour choose to proceed with his park in contravention of the zoning and without any approvals. Opposed by almost every government agency in the south and central Okanagan as well as large segments of the communities lining the lake (many of whom wondered where, on a small rocky outcrop such as Rattlesnake Island, one could safely dispose of sewage), the amusement park was still-born and left Haymour virtually bankrupt.

Fast forward 25 years to a much smaller construction project being undertaken at a “summer cottage” at Twin Lakes. A Vancouver contractor and friend of the property owner completed the project without first obtaining a building permit. In this instance, however, the property owner also happened to be the premier of the province; Glen Clark, and the contractor was a neighbour who was seeking a provincial gaming licence at the time; Dimitrios Pilarinos.

When the police paid a visit to the premier’s Vancouver house in March of 1999, the media quickly linked the deck and casino licence, suggesting the premier had received a free gift in exchange for influencing the granting of a licence. Although Clark would eventually be acquitted of the charges, he subsequently stated that the police “raid” of his house was the beginning of the end of his premiership. While the judge in his case purportedly admonished Clark for his “poor judgment” in hiring Pilarinos, it is unknown if Pilarinos was similarly reprimanded during his trial for failing to obtain a proper building permit from the Regional District!
In celebration of the Regional District’s first fifty years, former Directors and staff have been interviewed to talk about their time with the RDOS. Without fail, and despite the various challenges that may have confronted them during their term of office or employment, all have said that what they remember most about the RDOS is the camaraderie they had and relationships forged around the Board table and working to see projects that benefit their communities come to fruition. Attempting to predict the future is often derided as a fool’s errand, however, in this instance it is probably safe to say that the experiences of directors and staff that serve over the next 50 years will be similar to those of the previous 50 years.

Happy 50th Anniversary
Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen

See You in 2066

Current Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen Board of Directors
Seated left to right: Peter Waterman, Frank Armitage, Andrew Jakubeit, Mark Pendergraft, Karla Kozakevich, George Bush, Judy Sentes
Standing left to right: Andre Martin, Toni Boot, Ron Hovanes, Terry Schafer, Michael Brydon, Suzan McKortoff, Manfred Bauer, Tom Siddon, Helena Konanz, Bob Cayne, Elef Christensen

Okanagan Similkameen Regional Hospital District
Chair History

OSRHD Chair
C.W. Devine 1974

OSRHD Chair
K. M. Blagborne 1980

OSRHD Chair
M.H. Marton 1982

OSRHD Chair
Greg Norton 1990

OSRHD Chair
G. J. Kimboley 1992

OSRHD Chair
J.C. Bennett 1992

OSRHD Chair
H. R. Wilson 1996

OSRHD Chair
R. M. Mayer 1996

OSRHD Chair
William (Bill) Bush 1999

OSRHD Chair
Joe Cardoso 2000

OSRHD Chair
Joan Bush 2002

OSRHD Chair
Walter Deepot 2004

OSRHD Chair
Janice Perrino 2011

OSRHD Chair
Michael Brydon 2015

Thank You
All photos and quotes originate from stories penned by the Penticton Herald or by individuals interviewed as part of the Regional District’s 50th Anniversary celebrations.
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Created By
Chris Garrish, RDOS and Nona Lynn, RDOS

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