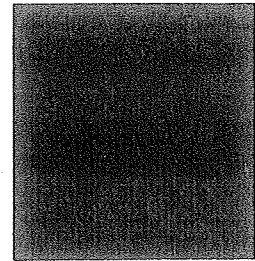


# THE REGIONAL DISTRICT CONCEPT



★ **What It Is**

★ **How It Works**

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*An Interview with . . .*

**Hon. Dan Campbell**

*Minister of Municipal Affairs*

Mr. Minister, what is the regional concept?

"It is a device for combining functions. It is **not** a political amalgamation. It is functional amalgamation in which a board is established to undertake services and administer them jointly."

When was the regional district concept conceived and by whom and for what specific purpose?

"It was conceived by my department in 1965, in co-operation with the Union of B.C. Municipalities, as an alternative to metro government. Regional government does the same job as metro government, but the functions that it assumes, with the exception of hospitals, are not statutory functions. In addition, the regional district has no authority to levy its own taxes."

Is the regional district system in operation anywhere else in Canada . . . or anywhere else in the world?

"Not as far as I know, though establishment of a somewhat similar system is under discussion in the Ottawa area."

What is the basic difference between a regional district and metro government?

"Metro government means a fourth level of government, a level between local government and provincial government. Regional district boards are made up of elected representatives appointed by the member municipalities, people already involved in the municipal picture, who know the problems and the issues."

"In outside areas—unorganized territories—where there is no local council, regional district representatives are elected by the people of the area."

"The biggest difference, though is in the fact that regional districts do not have taxing authority and, except for hospitals, they have no statutory functions applied by law."

How many regional districts are there in British Columbia today (August, 1968) and how many will there be eventually?

"There are 28 now and there will be 29 in all."

Are regional districts effective as they are now established?

"Some are effective and some aren't as effective as they should be. Those that aren't effective as they should be are those newly in the business. They are getting their activities outlined, getting their administration in order. The most effective are those which came in under the first legislation and have had an opportunity to try it out. I would say the most successful, effective regional districts are those in the Capital Region (Victoria) and East Kootenay."

How much co-operation has there been from the municipalities?

"As far as the device is concerned, we've had very few people say they don't agree with some form of regional government in principle. It's when you try to determine in the metropolitan regions exactly what functions might be undertaken that you get a great variety of opinion. I don't think this represents lack of interest in regional government. It represents a very common ingredient in the municipal picture today, fear and suspicion of new ideas and new arrangements for government. This feeling extends not only into the area of regional government but also when questions concerning political amalgamation are put forward."

Why has there been suspicion of regional districts by some municipal representatives?

"I feel that some representatives don't yet fully understand the purpose of regional districts. There is also, in some areas, the problem of parochialism."

Do you feel that council members truly represent the feelings of their citizens when they express parochial views on issues like regional districts and inter-municipal co-operation?

"That's difficult to answer. Frankly, I don't think they do. I think the average ratepayer has a wider view. He is interested in how his tax dollar is used, whether it is being used in the most efficient and effective way. He is just as interested in the unit cost of a municipal service as the gross cost. If it can be shown, for instance, that a service can be handled more efficiently and more effectively on a regional basis—in other words, if he can get better value for his dollar—I believe the citizens would prefer it handled on a regional basis. When this feeling starts to assert itself more strongly, I believe most municipal politicians and most municipal administrators will feel very quickly the weight of public opinion coming down against the parochial approach."

What functions have regional districts taken on?

"They all have hospitals, which is the only statutory function. Quite a number, about 15, have voluntarily taken on planning. Other functions range from garbage disposal to acquisition of parkland. Three have gone into some phase of the recreation business, like joint capital investment in an area or the operation of a recreational program. Others have gone into the water business . . . that is, the supply of water wholesale, similar to what is done by the Greater Vancouver Water District."

It is your purpose eventually to bring the Greater Vancouver Water District and the Greater Vancouver Sewerage and Drainage District into the regional district?

"That is the intent . . . there would be one regional government for the Lower Mainland. It would have a number of functions, some of which are already there."

Where would the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board fit into this?

"It would become part of the Greater Vancouver Regional District as well. It would be changed from its present position, in effect an advisory board, to that of the planning section of the political regional board."

How far would the Regional Planning Board's authority extend in its new role?

"It would be responsible for over-all general planning, the broad questions of land use within the area. It would not get into detailed municipal planning."

Will the government indefinitely continue its policy of leaving the assumption of functions up to regional districts, on a voluntary basis, or will it require districts to take on more functions?

"We have felt it is possible to have the municipalities choose the functions. That is the way we prefer it. In the metropolitan area of Vancouver, for example, it is my opinion that the question of garbage disposal could be looked at by the municipalities. If studies showed it would be cheaper and more efficient to handle garbage disposal through one body I assume the municipalities would voluntarily transfer the function to the regional district."

"It is, however, also my opinion that some of these problems could reach critical states and therefore the question of provincial government leadership would come up. This could—and I must say this with reluctance—lead to the government directing that certain municipal functions be placed under the regional districts, as was done with hospitals."

How long might it be before the government would take action?

"In the metropolitan area of Vancouver, I feel that the early 1970's are the critical years, the years in which some of the basic decisions will have to be made or that area will be in trouble."

"The questions that I think must be resolved by the early 70s are housing, transportation, waste disposal, regional park acquisition. The question of the future of the Greater Vancouver Water District and the Greater Vancouver Sewerage and Drainage District, both single-purpose boards, must be resolved. I think they would more properly be functions of the regional district."

"At least one operational system should also be considered for transfer to the regional district and that is policing."

"I don't think the question of fire protection is as critical, for example, as policing because the objective of a fire department is to spread itself out into neighborhoods and it's questionable if a case can be made for amalgamating fire departments."

To put it bluntly . . . you are giving the Lower Mainland—or the Greater Vancouver Regional District—until 1970 or 1971 to decide where it's going, what services it will assume; if it doesn't take the necessary action, the government will consider giving it more services on a compulsory basis?

"That's my opinion after examining the situation on the Lower Mainland. I would not like to see us go the way of places like Los Angeles, Chicago or New York where there are as many as 850 individual boards trying to cope with problems. That prospect is frightening."

What about placing school boards and assessment departments under the regional district?

"There are functions, like assessments, that the regional district could contract to undertake. This is already developing within some regions on such things as joint billings and centralized bookkeeping."

"Services like assessments, and other administrative functions, could be handled much more easily by a regional district using new technology and computers than they can be by individual municipalities."

"We have not considered making schools part of the municipal or regional district picture. It might in some cases be desirable to amalgamate school districts but the government is not at the present time planning to link schools with regional districts."

What about development of major cultural or recreational facilities, like a theatre or an arena, in a regional district where the municipalities agree only one is needed but can't agree where it should be located or how the costs should be shared?

"I think this is a question of growing up, of becoming more mature. There is no doubt, for example, that the taxpayers of the City of Vancouver have been subsidizing the cultural activities of the Lower Mainland. I feel it would be desirable to have facilities of this type undertaken by the regional district."

Are the existing boundaries of regional districts final, or might they be revised?

"The legislation provides for changes in boundaries. It also provides for neighboring districts to amalgamate a function, as they are doing in the Okanagan on the question of surveying the pollution problem in the lakes. In that case three regions are actually combining on the problems."

You have, in letters to regional district chairmen, set out the functions you feel could come within a district's authority. Some of these—specifically provision of major traffic arteries—could involve enormous expenditures. Do you feel such expenditures are truly a local government responsibility?

"They are a local responsibility in every other jurisdiction, although there are obviously arteries that are part and parcel of a provincial highway system. When you talk about traffic arteries you have to talk about the over-all, regional transportation system."

"This includes transit, the B.C. Hydro bus system. Whenever provincial representatives raise the question of the bus system the municipal representatives head for the trees claiming we want to dump the system on them."

"It's not possible to come up with a solution to the question of transportation in areas like the Lower Mainland unless everything is laid on the table for examination and study . . . transit, arteries, local streets and parking. You have to look at the over-all picture."

"It's impossible to isolate the traffic picture in one municipality from the picture in neighboring municipalities."

"I don't think you'll find the answer to the traffic issue until all parties sit down and talk about it. I don't know of a single metropolitan area which, ultimately, has not had to handle this question on a joint, co-operative basis. Nobody can look at the situation in Toronto, Montreal or San Francisco and discount the role played by the municipalities."

"The provincial government is ready to examine this whole question of transportation and to come up with a sensible answer so that the 70s won't be a mess."

But is the provincial government also prepared to sit down with the municipalities and outline ITS responsibilities?

"Certainly. We know we have a responsibility too. We will financially participate in transportation facilities but you can't draft a formula until you have the people sitting around the table discussing the whole situation."

Is the government prepared to discuss financial participation in the preparation of a major transportation plan for the Lower Mainland, the reserving of rights-of-way for arteries and so forth or is it prepared to talk only of the bus system?

"It is prepared to talk about financial participation in everything to do with a transportation plan."

"Federal assistance could also be available. There will be changes in the National Housing Act to provide assistance for transportation corridors and land banks and other urban transportation needs. I think it is quite obvious that urban transportation in this country will go in exactly the same direction as in the United States where there is involvement by all three levels of government."

Whose responsibility is it to get the people around the table?

"The provincial government is ready to give leadership on this issue. We would be ready to setup the talks."

Presumably, talks on transportation would include the future of the Hydro bus system. Is this a government ploy to get rid of the system? Do you think the municipalities should be operating the system?

"No, it is not a ploy to get rid of the system nor do I think the municipalities themselves should be operating the system. But I think they have a definite role to play in the decision-making process. They indicate this themselves by the fact they show concern over fare changes, re-scheduling and re-routing . . . and so they should."

There have been claims that the government's real purpose in establishing regional districts is to unload costs onto local governments, that it is just trying to shift the financial burden. Is this true?

"No. Services that have been mentioned as being possible functions of regional districts are in many instances already municipal functions and the only question is whether or not they are handled on an independent municipal basis or on a regional basis. No one, for instance, has ever suggested that garbage disposal is anything other than a municipal responsibility."

"In regard to other functions, like hospitals, new formulas have been prepared by the government. On hospitals the provincial share went up, not down. The same is true on regional parks. The government's share of hospital construction costs increased from 50 percent to 60 percent. Its formula for regional parks is a one-third outright provincial grant toward the acquisition of property. There was no provincial grant before the establishment of regional districts, in fact this was the first provincial government in Canada to initiate a program of grants toward acquisition of regional parklands."

Did you consider having regional district councils elected separately, as with Winnipeg's metro council?

"We considered it but did not feel it was appropriate. Electing a separate regional district council, with its own taxing powers and all the rest, would create frictions between the regional district and the local councils. You couldn't avoid it."

Regional district boards can—and have—made decisions without first referring to member councils for direction. Has this led to complaints?

"There have been some, mostly from council members who do not sit on regional district boards. I think this is understandable because the regional district concept is still establishing itself and some people in local government don't yet fully understand it. The regional district board's powers are clearly spelled out in the letters patent. Perhaps district representatives should report more frequently, in more detail, to their councils. This might overcome some of complaints."

Can a regional district board market its own bond issues for its own capital purposes, without going to its member councils for approval?

"Only if the member municipalities have first agreed to undertake the function for which the funds would be used."

Is there a limit on a regional district's borrowing powers or on its spending powers?

"Yes. For every function the limit on its borrowing powers must be spelled out in the letters patent."

Can you, or anyone, really show that there would be more efficiency if certain functions were handled on a regional basis? Is the public being short-changed with the present system?

"In my opinion they are not getting their dollar value in certain types of municipal services. They are not getting the level of service which they might expect if they pool their resources. I think any administrative device which brings together the full use of technology, on a joint effort basis, is bound to bring improved services. I doubt, for instance, that the Greater Vancouver area would ever go back to the individual provision of water or the individual provision of sewerage systems."

Is it a question of regionalism today and amalgamation tomorrow?

"No. The questions should not be confused. In one case you are talking about political amalgamation, as with Alberni and Port Alberni; the other is functional amalgamation. But concurrently with development of regional districts there should be some move toward amalgamation of municipalities, particularly on the Lower Mainland."

In other words you could have amalgamation of certain municipalities and still maintain the regional district . . . it would just have fewer members?

"That is correct, and I believe in some cases it would be a desirable objective."

On hospitals, member municipalities received credits for hospital funds they had spent; will credits be given for other functions like parks or public housing?

"The first thing that was done with hospitals was that the existing debt was spread so that everyone carried a fair share. It is possible that certain existing municipal parks might be purchased by a regional district, in fact, this has already been done in the Capital Region. The same thing could be done with public housing . . . the regional district could take over existing housing and compensate the affected municipalities."

What is the federal government's attitude toward regional districts?

"It doesn't, of course, have a policy for or against them because it doesn't get involved in matters of this kind. However, it is evident that the federal government is not going to make transfer payments to inadequate instruments of local government. In the new presentation of the National Housing Act I think you will see the basis upon which transfer payments will be made and these will be made only to a regional vehicle. Programs which are necessary in the urban world that we live in today will only be possible under regional government."

April 23, 1968

Mr. H. Nelson  
Chairman  
Regional District of East Kootenay  
28 - 11th Avenue S.,  
Cranbrook, B.C.

Dear Mr. Nelson:

It has been brought to the attention of both my staff and myself that there is some uncertainty in the minds of the Directors of many regional districts as to precisely what the Government envisages their role to be. While we have tried to outline our concept of the role of the regional district, it is quite evident that it bears elaboration. I have set out below what I consider an appropriate program of the kinds of activities in which regional districts could engage. I would not want it to be inferred that regional districts could not engage in other activities nor would I want it inferred that a regional district should enter all these fields all at once.

The activities of regional districts appear to break down into three broad categories, first, those that are of rather general benefit to the citizens of a region regardless of where they live, secondly, those that have a more limited benefit to particular area and groups of people within the region and lastly, certain activities for which there is clear gain if the region in effect undertakes these on behalf of the member areas as a work or service which in some cases would be on a contract basis.

Dealing with the first group we have:

1. The local responsibility for the provision of hospitals and hospital facilities.
2. An over-all regional library service.
3. A regional recreational program.
4. Regional environmental management which includes planning and in some instances participation in Federal-Provincial regional programs.

Dealing with the second group there are a number of things that can be undertaken by the Regional Board on behalf of the citizens living within a benefitting area to be paid for by such citizens and these could include such things as:

1. Ambulance service, fire protection, garbage disposal, water, sewerage, and similar things.
2. Community recreational facilities and programs.
3. Community environmental management for the electoral areas which among other things include zoning and building regulations and building inspection services.

Lastly, we see the Regional Board undertaking and providing certain services for the members on a service or contract basis and in this we would include:

1. Issuance and sale of debentures and debt management.
2. Engineering and planning services for member municipalities.
3. Provision and maintenance of an equipment pool for data processing including in some cases recording and accounting on behalf of member municipalities.
4. Central purchasing and public works equipment pool.

We would also hope that a clear working arrangement could be developed by the existing improvement districts and the Regional Board. In many instances this will be rather easily done where a Director is also a Trustee of an improvement district. Depending upon the circumstances and local wishes, in due course many of the improvement districts could assign their responsibilities and duties to the Board with the Trustee remaining as an advisory committee or be disbanded entirely. In any event for the future the Government expects the citizens in unorganized territory to look to the regional district as the vehicle for taking care of their local needs. It is not proposed to incorporate further improvement districts except in the few instances where currently incorporation processes are in progress.

Yours sincerely,

DAN CAMPBELL,

Minister



Mr. E. G. Adams, Chairman,  
Regional District of Fraser-Burrard,  
2294 West Tenth Avenue, Vancouver 9, B.C.

May 7, 1968

Dear Mr. Adams:

It has been brought to the attention of both my staff and myself that there is some uncertainty in the minds of the Directors of many of the regional districts as to precisely what the Government envisages their role to be. While we have tried to outline our concept of the role of the regional district it is quite evident that it bears elaboration. There are in fact, two kinds of regions in this Province, the so-called metro region and the trading area region. Their respective roles are naturally going to differ both in character and extent although they are structurally similar. Since you are in a metro region my comments are pertinent to such a region.

It is quite clear that most of the newer Federal programs are going to be made operative through a metro regional organization and I can only add that the Provincial Government views the future of a number of our assistance programs in much the same light. Therefore, quite apart from any other consideration it is necessary to establish a viable and effective metro regional unit. In general terms its role should be to undertake those things which would normally be a municipal responsibility but which in the metropolitan context cannot be successfully carried out by municipalities acting on an individual basis.

The functions of the metro region which we feel are basic are as follows:

1. The supply of water on a wholesale basis.
2. The disposal of waste materials on a wholesale basis and this includes both sewage and garbage.
3. The control of air pollutants.
4. The transportation framework for the metro region which would include major traffic arteries other than Provincial freeways and some tie-in with transit so that the whole is properly co-ordinated.
5. The local responsibility for the provision of public hospitals and whatever ambulatory services are required in connection therewith.
6. Public housing and the assembly of land where required for housing and other public purposes.
7. Regional parks.
8. Libraries and other cultural facilities related to a metro region.
9. Metro or regional land use planning which is a necessary requisite in respect to all the foregoing activities.
10. Public health services.
11. Certain pooling activities such as debenture sale and debt management and a data processing center.

I would not want it to be inferred that there could not be other joint activities but the ones mentioned are in my view a necessary part of the metro region. I should also add that I do not think the metro region must enter all these fields at one time. In my view the first and primary consideration is the structure necessary to carry out these functions with the powers being added from time to time as the metro regional district becomes equipped for the task.

Both metro regions have within their boundaries some rather sparsely populated areas—areas which cannot be expected for some indefinite period to undertake the responsibility of local government. Nevertheless these areas look to the metro centre and form a part of it. It is my view therefore that without departing too far from its metro character the Board may have to assume some minimum local responsibilities for these areas at their expense of course.

I hope the foregoing comments may aid the Board and the member municipalities in charting the course of development of the metro region. I shall be happy either personally or through my Deputy, to discuss any of the problems of the Board with the Directors or with a committee of Directors if this would be of any assistance.

Yours sincerely,

DAN CAMPBELL,  
Minister.