

## Mayor's Minute - February 12, 2020

I attended the BC Natural Resources Forum held in Prince George the last few days of January. This year, the Forum's key theme was *Strengthening BC's Competitive Advantage*.

You may be wondering: Why would the mayor of Summerland attend a Forum primarily focused forestry, mining and oil and gas? It's true that our economy does not rely heavily on these resource industries. However, agricultural land is *also* a natural resource and our community not only has a rich agricultural history, this sector remains economically important to Summerland.

In late 2019 an invitation to attend the Forum included a tentative agenda that showed the Honourable Lana Popham, Minister of Agriculture as a presenter. While I am interested in both mining/mining exploration and forestry—both are occurring on Crown land/Okanagan unceded territory within our community watersheds—I was particularly interested in learning the Province's thoughts on how BC can strengthen its competitiveness in the agriculture sector.

Unfortunately, Minister Popham was not in attendance. However, Premier John Horgan spoke about B.C.'s agricultural resources in his keynote address, stating: "We all need food. The more we can produce here (in B.C.) the better off we are all going to be. Not just in terms of transportation costs and the impact on climate, but in creating a place where we can count on food that is locally grown and where we are not just feeding ourselves but feeding the local economy on the land in rural British Columbia. Food production and food security is critically important to our wellbeing."

The Premier also spoke about the importance of agritech (the use of technology and technological innovation in agriculture) and the (now) released Food Security Task Force report *The Future of B.C.'s Food System*. This 80-page report provides four key recommendations on how B.C. "has an opportunity to build on its position as a leader in protecting the environment and mitigating greenhouse gas emissions".

Aside from the learning opportunities at this type of event, there is much value in the networking opportunities. For example, at an event for local and provincial elected officials I had the opportunity to speak to three of the five northwest B.C. mayors who, with the Resource Works Society, formed the Resource Municipalities Coalition in 2016.

Admittedly, when I first approached Fort St. John Mayor Lori Ackerman, I expected that our conversation would be solely about the City's challenges related to oil and gas extraction. While we initially talked about that (one of her concerns is losing local workers to projects in the hope of temporarily securing better pay and opportunities), when I stated my views on agriculture also being a natural resource, she wholeheartedly agreed. In fact, she stated that more than 80% of B.C. grain is grown in the area surrounding Fort St. John.

I found the conversations with Mayor Ackerman and FSJ planning staff, the Mayor of Tumbler Ridge (Keith Bertrand) and the executive directors of the Coalition and the Resource Works Society encouraging. They hope to develop a good relationship with both Indigenous and regional governments in Northern B.C. to strengthen their collective voice.

This is a collaboration that seems to be working. After preliminary discussions with some area elected officials, I reached out to the Resource Municipalities Coalition to ask them to consider exploring a similar Coalition in Southern B.C. (outside of the Lower Mainland).

While we do not have much oil and gas extraction in our region, there are area residents who work in this sector as well as in mining and forestry. Further, this region is rich in agricultural history. In partnership with our Indigenous neighbours, local governments could provide an informed perspective on a

sustainable Southern B.C. food system that provides both social and economic benefits while protecting natural assets and ecosystems.

Becoming a world leader in sustainable agriculture through agri-tech and emerging technologies is an ambitious goal but one that, I think, is achievable. I look forward to a day when Canadians can enjoy food security and the social, economic, and environmental benefits of a sustainable food future are enjoyed by Canadians first, that is, before the broader export market.

I look forward to a day when local food systems are a priority and thrive in British Columbia, and when we all enjoy food security and the social, economic, and environmental benefits a sustainable food system provides.