



Electoral Area F Governance & Services Study
May 2022

REGIONAL DISTRICTS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an overview of regional districts in British Columbia's system of local government. Regional districts' fundamental roles are explained, as are their governance structure, voting rules, service responsibilities and system of service finance. The paper is intended to give members of the Electoral Area F Governance & Services Study Committee a common base of knowledge on which to build going forward.

REGIONAL DISTRICTS

Regional districts are federations of municipalities and electoral areas. Each is governed by a regional board of directors with representation from every member jurisdiction. Member jurisdictions of the Regional District of Nanaimo (RDN) include four municipalities — Nanaimo, Parksville, Qualicum Beach and Lantzville — along with seven electoral areas, one of which is Electoral Area F. RDN's Board of Directors has a total of 19 Directors.

Regional districts exist, first and foremost, to provide services. In this role, regional districts:

- serve as the local governments for their electoral areas, responsible for providing basic services such as community planning, water supply and fire protection
- are inter-jurisdictional service bodies that provide sub-regional services to combinations of municipalities and electoral areas
- are regional service bodies, responsible for providing important regional services to their entire regional communities

Local, sub-regional and regional services are established by regional districts in direct response to the expressed needs, desires and instructions of the member municipalities and electoral areas. The boards of directors are the political forums in which these needs, desires and instructions are expressed.

Every regional district is required, by law, to provide certain services — general government, electoral area planning and solid waste management planning are three common examples. Most services provided by regional districts, however, are voluntary in nature, established to meet the specific needs of members.

REGIONAL DISTRICT DECISION-MAKING

Board of Directors

Each regional district board of directors consists of two types of directors:

- electoral area directors, elected directly by rural area voters for four-year terms
- municipal directors, appointed to the regional board by their municipal councils for a term determined by their councils

Each member municipality and electoral area has a voting strength on the board based on population. In the RDN, every jurisdiction receives one vote for every 2,500 residents, including residents who live on First Nations Reserves. For municipalities, the resulting voting strength is divided by five to determine the number of directors appointed to the board. The RDN's Board, with its total of 19 Directors, includes eight from the City of Nanaimo,

two from Parksville, one from each of Qualicum Beach and Lantzville, and one from each of the region's electoral areas.¹

Directors on each regional district board select the chair and vice chair from among their members. The chair is the chief spokesperson for the regional district, runs board meetings and establishes standing committees to assist with governance.

Voting Rules

Regional districts have special voting rules that are different from those which apply to municipalities. In municipalities, all members of council vote on all matters. At regional districts, some regional district decisions are made by the entire board of directors, whereas others are made only by the directors who represent the jurisdictions that participate in the services under consideration. Decisions that involve all directors are made using *corporate votes*, of which there are two types:

- *Corporate Unweighted Votes* — These votes are those in which every director votes, and every director receives one vote. They are used to establish new services, make bylaws to exercise a regulatory authority, set rules to govern the conduct of the board's businesses, and take certain other actions.
- *Corporate Weighted Votes* — All directors vote on these matters but receive different numbers of votes based on the populations of their respective jurisdictions, and the regional district's voting unit. Corporate weighted votes are used to acquire or dispose property, adopt annual budgets, authorize borrowing, and address all other financial matters.

Decisions in which only a portion of the board participates are made using *stakeholder votes*. Stakeholder votes are used to make, change or repeal bylaws that govern the administration or operation of a service. Directors from jurisdictions that participate in the services are entitled to vote; other directors are not. All stakeholder votes are weighted, with directors receiving different

¹ Electoral areas in every regional district, including the RDN, are represented by only one electoral

numbers of votes based on their jurisdictions' populations and the regional district's voting unit. If there is only one participating area in the subject service, the entire board of directors votes.

Figure 1 shows the number of votes at the time of writing assigned to each Regional District of Nanaimo jurisdiction for corporate weighted votes and stakeholder votes. The voting strength in Figure 1 reflects a voting unit of 2,500, and the 2016 Census populations. Growth between 2016 and 2021 may prompt the Board to request an increase to the voting unit once the Minister of Municipal Affairs has certified new 2021 populations.

Committees of the Board

As noted earlier, the chair of each regional district board establishes standing committees to assist with governance and public policy development. The chair also determines the number of directors,

Figure 1
Voting Strength for Weighted Votes
(Voting Unit: 2,500)

Jurisdiction	Population*	Votes
Nanaimo	90,504	37
Parksville	12,514	6
Qualicum Beach	8,943	4
Lantzville	3,605	2
Electoral Area A	7,429	3
Electoral Area B	4,033	2
Electoral Area C	3,168	2
Electoral Area E	6,355	3
Electoral Area F	7,724	4
Electoral Area G	7,465	3
Electoral Area H	3,958	2
Total RDN	155,698	68

* 2016 Census. For purpose of determining voting strength, populations include First Nation Reserves.

area director, irrespective of population and voting unit.

and which specific directors, to appoint. At the RDN there are three standing committees:

- Electoral Area Services Committee, comprised of the RDN's seven Electoral Area Directors, including the Director for Area F
- Executive Committee, with eight Directors
- Committee of the Whole, which includes all members of the Board

There are also five select committees at the RDN. Select committees are established under the authority of the full Board. Three of these committees provide advice on specific services, including Solid Waste Management, Transit and Regional Parks. One focuses on services to the Oceanside sub-region, and one deals with Community Grants.

REGIONAL DISTRICT SERVICES

Regional districts may provide a broad range of services. With the exception of a few provincially-mandated functions, the services are determined by the regional board with the support of member jurisdictions and/or residents. Since the board only provides services that member jurisdictions or residents agree the regional district should provide, the menu of services varies by regional district, and tends to be different within each electoral area of any single regional district.

Services are established to respond to needs that may be identified by the board, electoral area directors, member municipalities, staff or residents. A proposed service must be examined through a process to determine its feasibility. Service scope, cost, delivery options and other factors are considered during feasibility studies. If a service is deemed feasible, a service establishing bylaw must be drafted and presented to the regional board. The bylaw must be approved by the board using the corporate unweighted voting rule, and must receive the approval of the residents that will receive and pay for the service. Approval can be provided by way of a petition, an alternative approval process or a referendum. Alternatively, a council or electoral area director may, in most cases, give approval on behalf of residents within the specific jurisdiction.

Ultimately the bylaw must be approved by the Inspector of Municipalities.

It should be noted that the provincial government provides certain key services to all electoral areas in the province, irrespective of electoral area size or location. Local roads and local policing are the two key examples. Regional districts have no responsibility for these services, and little ability to influence the delivery of them.

REGIONAL DISTRICT FINANCE

Unlike a municipality, which has the flexibility to collect and allocate "general revenues" to its services, each service provided by a regional district must be budgeted separately. Costs are recovered by billing homeowners and other property owners who benefit from the service. The full cost incurred in providing a specific service must be covered by the property tax and other revenue collected for or generated by that service; one service cannot subsidize another. Taxes raised for fire protection, for example must be used for — and only for — the fire department.

Regional districts raise funds primarily through property taxation. Value taxes, which are the most common type of property tax, are based on the assessed value of a property. Parcel taxes, which are less common, are equal for each property or type of property, irrespective of assessment. Tax bills sent to each property itemize each service and the associated tax.

Regional districts generate some revenues from user fees and charges, such as utility charges, dog licences and development application fees. Provincial government grants are an additional source of revenue.

In electoral areas, the provincial government collects property taxes on behalf of regional districts. Within municipal boundaries, property taxes for regional district services are collected by the municipality. The province and municipalities transfer collected funds to the regional district to pay for the services provided.