

B.C. premier promises to listen to local government on heritage act changes, further isolating his forests minister

Vaughn Palmer: Forests minister with no friends in local government after attacking UBCM president

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File photo: B.C. Premier David Eby at an event in Surrey in September 2024. Photo by Jason Payne /PNG

VICTORIA — Premier David Eby tried to placate his critics in local government on Friday by vowing to incorporate at least some of their concerns into the NDP government’s ambitious makeover of the Heritage Conservation Act.

“We have heard your feedback,” the premier acknowledged in his address to the annual convention of the Union of B.C. Municipalities. “Your feedback will result in changes to the legislation.”

The Act, largely unchanged since it was enacted by the NDP government of the 1990s, needs fixing, Eby maintained.

But the amended version “has to work for all B.C.,” the premier told the mayors and councillors. “We will not do it at the expense of local communities. That is my commitment to you.”

Eby didn’t specify which of the existing proposals would be amended. But in a workshop Thursday, provincial officials provided a preliminary list of feedback from local government.

Heading the list were “concerns that the new requirements could further impact permitting timelines and costs.”

Local government representatives also identified “a need for resources, guidance and training on implementation of the new requirements, especially in smaller communities.”

They also wanted commitments on public education, improvements to the archeological database, and continued engagement on implementation.

Responding to the latter request, the province announced earlier that the period for feedback on the legislation was extended to mid-November.

The Act governs the designation and protection of Heritage sites and establishes a permitting process for developing the sites and the lands around them. The existing law is widely associated with generating crippling and expensive delays in permitting and widespread confusion all sides.

A working group of provincial and Indigenous officials have spent the past two years developing proposals to modernize the Act and — it is said — “streamline” the approval process.

They also propose to broaden the definition of heritage sites and give First Nations expanded authority over the permitting process and the management and protection of the sites themselves.

The government recently confirmed that the working group has identified 57 areas for change and reached consensus in 53 of them.

The working group does not include any representatives from local government, only province officials and Indigenous representatives.

Over the summer, local government leaders were granted a single opportunity to review the proposals in a three-hour webinar.

UBCM President Trish Mandewo complained Wednesday that her members had been slighted, citing the contrast between two years of consultations with Indigenous leaders and three hours for local government.

“To take two years to develop the changes, and confine engagement with local governments to a single information sharing meeting in August is unfortunately the continuation of a concerning pattern when it comes to this government’s approach to working with local governments,” she charged.

Mandewo’s complaint, aired in speech and a followup news release, provoked a strong pushback from Forests Minister Ravi Parmar, the cabinet minister in charge of the “transformation project” for the Act.

He met with reporters a few hours after Mandewo spoke and pretty much called her a liar for portraying the three-hour webinar as local government’s lone engagement on changes in the act.

“Local governments have been involved in the discussions and engagements from the beginning of this process,” claimed Parmar. “More than 360 local government representatives have participated in engagement activities.”

But Mandewo knew whereof she spoke. Local government leaders were never part of the working group that drafted the proposals. And when granted that one online session over the summer, it felt like they were at the receiving end of a one-way briefing on a fait accompli.

Parmar’s attack on the UBCM president angered delegates and raised questions about his own judgment.

None of that was evident on Friday when Mandewo introduced the premier and then presided over a questions and answer session after the speech.

Later, when Eby spoke to reporters, he was asked about calls for Parmar to apologize to the UBCM president.

The premier brushed off the concern, saying “I have every confidence in Ravi.”

But on the day of Parmar’s ill-advised attack on the UBCM president, I was provided with an insight into the lengths to which the government went to prop up the minister.

One mayor confided to me that an hour or so before Parmar spoke to reporters, he’d got a call from government asking if the mayor would agree to join the minister at his news conference and stand with him.

The government does this all the time, recruiting so-called “validators” to stand behind or alongside ministers to add credibility to whatever they are saying.

In this case, the mayor was being recruited to suggest that at least some local government officials were onside with the minister and, presumably, satisfied with his meagre consultations on the Act.

The mayor, seeing they were trying to use him to undermine the UBCM president, turned down the invitation. He was busy at another event. But neither was he born yesterday.

Parmar had to face the news media without validators, alone. He may find himself similarly isolated in future, because he made no friends with his rash performance this week.

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