

Heritage act changes to have sweeping effect on land development in B.C.

Vaughn Palmer: The B.C. NDP and their First Nations partners likely already know what they want and hope to get it enacted with minimal public scrutiny and backlash

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What is known about proposed changes to the B.C. heritage act is that it will widen requirements for archeological "data" before property is developed and protect "intangible" heritage. Photo by B.C. Hydro

VICTORIA — The New Democrats are rewriting B.C.'s heritage conservation legislation to broaden what must be protected and increase Indigenous oversight of the permitting process for development of public, and in some cases private, land.

The government says the changes are being undertaken to streamline and modernize the existing Heritage Conservation Act, which dates back to the 1990s NDP government.

“The Act is how we protect important cultural and archeological sites in B.C., but the current system doesn’t work well for people, and it doesn’t fully reflect our shared values or commitments,” says Forests Minister Ravi Parmar, the cabinet member in charge of the Heritage Conservation Act transformation.

“I am committed to ensuring our collective work will lead to a system that will support faster permitting, better planning and more meaningful discussions with people, communities, industry and First Nations.”

Though the government has lately offered briefings to local government officials and other interested parties, they are late arrivals to a process that began in 2021 as a joint exercise among the province and First Nations.

The Union of B.C. Municipalities noted the lag after the government announced a so-called “engagement opportunity” over the summer.

“The specific and detailed legislative amendments now being proposed were co-developed by the provincial government and First Nations representatives with no local government involvement,” said the July 30 notice from the UBCM. “It is unclear how much room there is for changes in these proposed amendments.”

The municipal officials who’ve participated in the engagement process have been required to sign non-disclosure agreements, I gather.

One mayor tells me that because of the NDA, his municipal manager could only hint at what was coming.

Still, he managed to convey that if the legislation goes ahead as intended next year, it will have a sweeping impact on the development of public and private land.

That would also appear to be the case from the 19-page discussion paper posted on the website for the transformation project.

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