

UBCM leader blasts NDP for lack of consultation on Heritage Conservation Act

Vaughn Palmer: Indigenous leaders got two years to consult on Heritage Conservation Act changes, municipal leaders got a three-hour lecture

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The outgoing UBCM president, Trish Mandewo, speaks at the UBCM convention in Victoria. Photo by Scott McAlpine /UBCM

VICTORIA — Monday was the first day of the annual gathering of the Union of B.C. Municipalities and I had just picked up my credentials at the media booth at the Victoria convention centre.

Whereupon a UBCM official stepped up to brief me on the growing backlash among mayors and councillors over the NDP government's ambitious makeover of the Heritage Conservation Act.

The project to transform the Act has been worked on for two years by the New Democrats and their First Nations partners. But after the proposals were mostly finalized, local government had been given a single three-hour session in mid-August under the guise of “engagement.”

It was pretty much a one-way conversation, I was told. Less “what do you think?” than “here’s where we’re going, so prepare yourselves.”

The New Democrats are promoting the effort as a necessary “modernization” of legislation enacted by their government in the 1990s to identify and protect heritage sites.

They say the proposals will “streamline” permitting by reducing delays and expediting development approvals on Crown and private land.

Local officials have their doubts, based on what they heard in that single, high-level briefing.

B.C. already has 65,000 designated heritage sites, most with Indigenous connections.

The New Democrats propose to expand the already broad grounds for heritage designation and grant Indigenous nations greater authority over permitting, management and enforcement on new sites and old.

That sounds like a recipe for more obstacles to permitting and greater delays in securing approval, say local officials familiar with the current workings of the act.

Tuesday, I heard that UBCM was not alone in those concerns. I got two accounts of an online briefing organized by the B.C. Business Council with the cabinet member in charge of the act, Forests Minister Ravi Parmar.

I was told Parmar faced many questions and provided few answers. Industry participants thought he played down their concerns, implying that the proposals had widespread support.

Later Tuesday, I was told to be sure to attend Wednesday’s address by UBCM President Trish Mandewo. The Coquitlam councillor was finishing up her term and decided to use the platform to deliver a jolt to the provincial government.

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