



The ASBC Pages

HERITAGE SITES DESERVE ATTENTION

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Tonight, when the last noisemaker sounds and the last toast is offered, it will mark not only the start of a new year, but the end of one filled with special celebrations about British Columbia's rich history.

For 365 days, after all, we have been celebrating our past. The year 2008 marked the 150th anniversary of the colony of British Columbia, of the Fraser River gold rush, of Victoria's Chinatown, its fire department and its police department -- and, of course, the British Colonist, the newspaper that has evolved into today's Times Colonist.

We haven't had a provincial celebration like this since, well, 1958 -- the centennial year.

That 1958 centennial did not simply look back at the past, it set the stage for many good things to follow. Our centennial was a major stepping stone for preserving and interpreting provincial history. Momentum was created -- and has lasted decades -- in developing policies for archeological site protection, establishing local museums, protecting vulnerable historic resources such as Barkerville and empowering community heritage programs.

Great social and economic value has been generated through this historical legacy.

Has the sesquicentennial of 2008 triggered the same amount of energy? So far, no.

We need to get moving on heritage conservation and interpretation. Heritage programs are not the same as they were in 1958.

What roles are to be played by the province and its partners in the heritage com-

munity? And, given the economic situation around the world, how much emphasis will be placed on heritage issues?

It should be recognized that work on a strategy for heritage is not a frill or a minor element of public policy development. It is a significant matter relating to First Nations relations, the tourist industry and the viability of smaller communities. As well, a key element of our approach to community sustainability is planning the effective use of the stock of our older housing and institutional buildings.

Recently the British government published its proposals for simplifying existing legislation through a new heritage protection bill. Here in British Columbia, the heritage branch is undertaking a strategic plan -- and we hope that the province's approach to heritage conservation can be revitalized as part of it.

One thing to consider: Treating our heritage resources as a system instead of as a series of unrelated sites.

English Heritage manages and markets 400 properties as a network. The Canadian government along with jurisdictions such as New Zealand and Alberta continue to operate systems of historic sites. There is no reason why that approach would not work here.

Since 2001, however, the ministry responsible for heritage has embarked on a process to devolve most provincial historic sites such as Point Ellice House, the Hat Creek Ranch and Fort Steele into the hands of others at the community level. As a result, there is no longer a provincewide approach to managing and marketing these significant features for local use and tourism. The critical mass of the historic sites network has diminished significantly.

In British Columbia there are 35 national historic sites, and some of them, such as

Butchart Gardens, incorporate the national designation within their corporate image. But our provincial government maintains little expertise to undertake historic site research, designation or marking for commemoration of any sites of provincial historic significance.

Until the 1980s the lead for this work was handled by the Provincial Historic Sites Advisory Board. Through this group the cases for protecting sites such as the Keremeos Grist Mill, the Hat Creek Ranch and St. Ann's Academy were undertaken. Those were key locations, and the approach ensured the sites were saved.

So why not re-establish a provincial panel to deal with provincial historic resources? There are still sites that need protection, including the unique lake vessel the Tarahne in Atlin, the remaining sections of the Dewdney Trail and the Alexandra Bridge in the Fraser Canyon. They need to be given full consideration within our history.

The B.C. 150 celebrations proved that British Columbians have an interest in our history. Now that the year is coming to an end, it is time to build on that legacy by recognizing significant events, individuals and sites from our history.

There is much to be done, and no time to waste.

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