

A Night for the Profession: PIBC's World Town Planning Day Gala

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On the evening of Saturday, November 8, 2025, the Pan Pacific in downtown Vancouver filled with the excitement of catch-up conversations, the clink of glasses and the familiar slap of name tags — signs that the planning profession had come together in force. The Planning Institute of British Columbia's World Town Planning Day gala returned this year with the purpose of a profession that, increasingly, is being asked to solve some of the most consequential questions facing communities today: how we house people, move people, protect the environment, and bind diverse voices into a single, liveable city. The event gathered planners from across B.C. and the Yukon to honour new members, long-serving members and to hear reflections from senior voices in the profession.

The keynote speaker of the evening was Oleg Verbenkov RPP, MCIP, founding principal of Pacific Land Group, who closed the

night with a reflective oral history of his more than four-decade career. Verbenkov began his planning journey in 1981 as a Planning Assistant with the City of Surrey, and his presentation traced the evolution of both his practice and the profession itself. He guided the audience from an era of dusty council chambers, hand-typed reports, and hand-drawn maps to today's planning landscape shaped by data, modelling, and even artificial intelligence. More than a catalogue of projects, Verbenkov's talk offered a thoughtful reflection on how planning has matured in its understanding of the public good, risk assessment, and the long arc of development decision-making.

As a mid-career planner myself, what resonated most was Oleg's blend of detail (through lived experience), and human scale. He described early career projects — heritage conservation efforts, complex industrial

build-to-suits and community design exercises — with the kind of specificity that reveals the daily craftsmanship of planning. He credited mentors, recounted setbacks and, crucially, foregrounded the ethical choices that planners make when technical trade-offs meet community values. Oleg's humour and the modesty of his storytelling invited the room to consider planning as both a technical discipline and an ongoing conversation with place. His talk felt like a passing of the baton: a reminder that institutional knowledge — the lessons learned on specific sites, with specific political realities and neighbours — remains indispensable even as tools change.

The program was rounded out by a slate of respected leaders from across the profession. Lesley Cabott RPP, FCIP, President of the Canadian Institute of Planners, spoke briefly and emphasized the national picture: climate resilience, equitable growth and the imperative



to build planning capacity in municipalities of all sizes. Keri-Ann Austin, President of the Local Government Management Association, spoke to the operational challenges local governments face in turning policy into built reality, and the need for stronger collaboration between administrators and planners. Dan Huang RPP, MCIP — an established voice within CIP and a frequent presence in regional planning conversations — offered reflections on professional responsibility and the need to keep planning's ethical compass aligned with public trust. Their remarks underscored that while the challenges are shared, the solutions require coordination across disciplines and jurisdictions.

A central and celebratory element of the evening was the recognition of newly accredited Registered Professional Planners (RPPs) and those marking long service. The stage saw the awarding of pins and certificates, and

during this portion of the evening a generational cross-section was on display: newly minted RPPs fresh from graduate programs and pathway exams beside colleagues with 25 years or more of service. Pacific Land Group's announcement of Oleg's 25+ years of certified membership mirrored the evening's theme — that institutional memory, mentorship and formal professionalization all matter to a field that is often judged by its results decades after a project is completed.

Beyond awards and speeches, the gala provided an informal yet important forum

for networking and discussion. Conversations over dinner ranged from density bonusing and affordable housing delivery to the inclusion of Indigenous reconciliation in project approvals. There was much talk about the evolving tools of the trade — how GIS, scenario modelling and emerging AI tools change the planner's workflow — but equally strong was a concern that technology must not replace the relational work that is at the heart of planning. From a personal perspective, I left the night hopeful: inspired by senior colleagues' long view and excited by the sense that the profession is

welcoming new approaches while protecting core values.

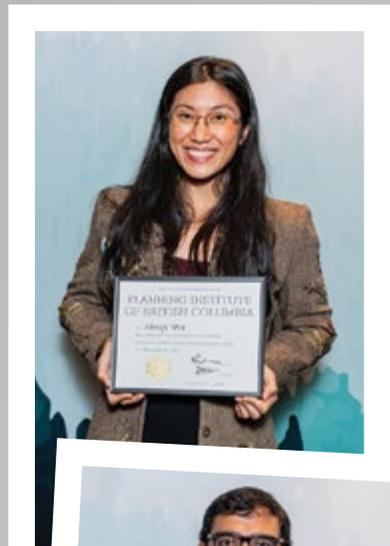
Celebrated on November 8th in many countries, World Town Planning Day was founded to raise public awareness about planning's role in creating sustainable, equitable communities. The celebration is global in scope; in many places it's a moment to reflect on the profession's past achievements and future responsibilities. At the gala, a brief segment traced the day's origins and its growth into an international moment of solidarity among planning organizations — an appropriate framing for an evening that drew together municipal staff, consultants, academics and provincial regulators. The history of WTPD serves as a reminder that while planning's methods evolve, its core mission — shaping better places for people — remains constant.

What came through in table conversations after Oleg's keynote was recognition for planners who steward a long career without losing a capacity to adapt. Oleg's own narrative — moving from hand-drawn plans and hand-written council reports to projects that now require digital engagement strategies, environmental modelling and multi-stakeholder consensus building — inferred the broader story of planning's modernization. He encouraged younger planners to become conversant in both the technical and human aspects of their work: utilize all the technology that is available, but also don't neglect the conversations that create trust. His mix of humour, humility and judgement made his message feel less like a lecture and more like mentorship.

The night was not without its sober moments. Speakers acknowledged the scale of the challenges ahead — housing shortages, climate-linked infrastructure needs, and the social inequities that planning must address. But those acknowledgements were accompanied by pragmatic optimism: examples of successful policy adjustments, evidence-based transit investments, and rapidly proliferating partnerships between municipalities and community groups. While the profession cannot solve structural problems alone, it remains uniquely positioned to bridge the technical, the political and the social.

This was the second WTPD gala I have attended, and I find that it offers more than a ceremonial pat on the back; it provides a platform where institutional memory meets the future. Oleg Verbenkov's four-decade practice is a testament that planning is a career of patience, craft and public service. The new RPPs, the long-service members, and the leadership voices from CIP and LGMA who shared the stage all emphasized that the future of planning depends on the concept





PIBC members in attendance and receiving recognition at the 2025 World Town Planning Day gala. Congratulations to the many new and long serving RPPs!

of learning from past experiences while embracing future innovation. For anyone watching the profession from a distance: planning matters, people in planning matter, and the work goes on.

If there was a single takeaway from the gala event, it was that planning is an intergenerational project: one that needs the institutional memory of experienced practitioners like Oleg Verbenkov, the stewardship of professional bodies like CIP and LGMA, and the energy of a new cohort of RPPs ready to shape the next four decades.

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100 Years of Zoning: Part 2

Bill Buholzer FCIP

In Part 1 of this article, published in the Summer 2025 issue of *Planning West* magazine, we examined the context surrounding the enactment of British Columbia's 1925 Town Planning Act. This included planning influences from Britain, the United States, and other Canadian provinces; model planning legislation promoted by the Commission of Conservation and its town planning advisor, Thomas Adams; and the Act's provisions authorizing the preparation of official town plans.

Zoning Bylaws: land use control and an opportunity to be heard

The scope of zoning regulations authorized under the *Town Planning Act* was limited to the use of land and the use, height, bulk and siting of buildings; development standards were required to be uniform throughout the designated districts. (Municipal councils were enabled, but not required, to indicate future zoning district boundaries with their respective land use regulations in the official town plan.) Management of the architectural design or appearance of buildings was not within the scope of a zoning bylaw; this would eventually be permitted generally under the Vancouver Charter and on the University Endowment Lands, and for buildings other than single-family dwellings by way of the development permit system under the Local Government Act. A municipal council enacting zoning regulations under the *Town Planning Act* was required to "have due regard" to six enumerated considerations (which would be retained in the zoning enabling legislation for decades and can still be found in the recitals to some B.C. zoning bylaws):

- the promotion of public health, safety, convenience and welfare;
- the prevention of overcrowding and the preservation of the amenity of residential districts;
- the securing of adequate access, light and air;
- the suitability of districts for particular uses;
- the conservation of property values;
- the direction of development.

The Commission of Conservation had strongly emphasized the promotion of public health as a principal concern for town planning – a focus that garnered support from organizations like local boards of trade that might otherwise have been at best ambivalent about planning legislation.

Procedurally, the Act required the Council to afford to “all persons who might be affected by the proposed bylaw” an opportunity to be heard on the matters covered in a zoning bylaw. This language would be amended in 1928 to require a hearing at which “all persons who deem themselves affected by the proposed bylaw shall be afforded an opportunity to be heard”. To what extent has this early shift in wording from “might be affected” (suggesting an objective test of standing to speak at a hearing) to “deem themselves affected” (indicating a subjective test) been responsible for the subsequent evolution of public hearing practices in B.C., including the affording of opportunities to be heard on proposed land use changes to pretty much anyone who shows up at a hearing?¹ Also added in 1928 was authority for the Council to, without further notice, “give such effect as it deems fit to representations made at the hearing” – authority that would subsequently be narrowed (but not in Vancouver) by limiting post-hearing density reductions and prohibiting post-hearing changes in permitted land use.

In relation to amendment and repeal of a zoning bylaw, the 1925 Act permitted owners to “protest” such a bylaw. If at least 20% of the owners of affected street frontage (or properties across the street or lane from affected frontage) presented their protest prior to the public hearing, the bylaw could be adopted only by a 3/5 vote of all members of Council. This feature would be repealed.

The *Town Planning Act* contained simple provisions dealing with non-conforming uses, withholding of building permits during Council consideration of a zoning bylaw “when the Council is of opinion that the construction of the building would interfere with the work of zoning”, and property being deemed not to be taken or injuriously affected by the passage of a zoning bylaw – the “no compensation” rule that continues in both the *Local Government Act* and the *Vancouver Charter*. This rule replaced provisions of the Commission of Conservation’s model Act that required compensation for impairment of land value attributable to planning but also subjected owners to a planning betterment levy that anticipated (by a half-century) “land value capture” mechanisms such as community amenity contributions. Zoning boards

of appeal were given jurisdiction to relax the zoning bylaw not only where literal enforcement would create “unnecessary hardship”, but also where an appellant was simply dissatisfied with the decision of an official charged with the administration or enforcement of the bylaw. The latter aspect of board of variance jurisdiction survives only under the *Vancouver Charter*.

Town Planning Commissions: citizen planners

In the early 20th century, town planning was often initiated by civic associations and civic-minded individuals rather than local politicians or planning professionals. The preparation of Vancouver’s first city plan, for example, was overseen by the Vancouver City Planning Commission, which engaged the U.S. firm Harland Bartholomew & Associates to prepare the plan. The *Town Planning Act* accommodated this approach by authorizing the creation of town planning commissions acting in an advisory capacity to the Council. Once a TPC was established, any proposed zoning bylaw had to be referred for recommendations on appropriate district boundaries and associated regulations. This was not required for official town plans, though councils could have chosen to refer a proposed plan to their TPC. Any proposal to undertake public works that were not consistent with an adopted official plan (which a council could approve by a vote of 2/3 of its members) had first to be referred to the TPC for consideration and report. (Such works now cannot be undertaken under any circumstances.) Apart from some provisions for *ex officio* TPC membership for mayors (eventually replaced by a prohibition on elected official participation in these advisory bodies), and the mandatory referral of proposed zoning bylaws (all such referrals are now discretionary), the current enabling provisions for advisory planning commissions in the *Local Government Act* and *Vancouver Charter* differ very little from those in the 1925 *Town Planning Act*.

Launching the Legislation: building attractive cities

Having granted Royal Assent to the *Town Planning Act*, the Lieutenant-Governor in closing the second session of the Sixteenth Parliament towards the end of 1925 mentioned the Act as a highlight of the session: “The Town Planning Bill is designed to encourage a more scientific and better-adjusted system governing the erection of buildings in populous centres, and should be the means of imparting an added attractiveness

to our growing cities.” This mildly-stated enthusiasm for planning can be contrasted with Herbert Hoover’s preface to the revised 1926 version of the Department of Commerce’s Standard State Zoning Enabling Act, in which he boasted that the “discovery that it is practical by city zoning to carry out reasonable neighbourhood agreements as to the use of land has made an almost instant appeal to the American people”, citing the enactment of 170 new city zoning ordinances in the U.S. between September of 1921 and the end of 1923, and more than 200 more by the end of 1925. In our province, by the 1960s most municipalities of any significant size had adopted official plans and enacted zoning regulations, with only a handful of regional district electoral areas steadfastly resisting the allure of zoning. No B.C. municipality or regional district seems ever to have repealed its official plan or zoning bylaw without replacing it, and recent changes to Part 14 of the *Local Government Act* related to housing supply have eliminated that option. With the addition of tools like rental tenure zoning and inclusionary zoning (which would perhaps not have had “instant appeal to the American people” 100 years ago), our planning and zoning tools have been modestly updated to deal with 21st century land use management issues. Whether the “attractiveness of our growing cities” mentioned in the Legislature 100 years ago can be further enhanced by means of land use regulations that support or require a broader range of housing opportunities than B.C.’s planning legislation has produced so far, will be a principal concern as our planning legislation enters its second century.

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¹A footnote to the U.S. Department of Commerce Standard State Zoning Enabling Act asserted that both “parties in interest” and citizens generally *Local Government Act* should have an opportunity to be heard because “it is right that every citizen should be able to make his voice heard and protest any ordinance that might be detrimental to the best interests of the city” – not, it may be noted in relation to the NIMBY phenomenon, detrimental to their own best interests.

PIBC's Professional Governance Research and Engagement Project – A Focus on You!

Deborah Jensen RPP, MCIP (Chair, RPP Regulation Sub-Committee, PIBC Policy & Public Affairs Committee)

Author's Note: this is the fifth article in *Planning West* reporting on the status of PIBC's Professional Governance Research and Engagement Project.

Since the Fall of 2024, PIBC and its RPP Regulation Subcommittee has been actively engaging with our membership about professional governance. This follows from the PIBC Board direction in December 2023 to undertake outreach and education about the *Professional Governance Act* (PGA) and its opportunities and implications for PIBC and its membership. This includes engaging PIBC members about professional standards and the PGA, presenting research and analysis on issues identified, and addressing potential opportunities and tradeoffs.

The primary purpose of the PGA is to set out a governance framework for self-regulating professions that protects the public interest from, and reduces the risk of, unethical and incompetent practice. So far, six professions

have been regulated under the PGA, including architects and engineers; but does not yet include planning professionals. No action has been taken by either PIBC or the provincial government that would lead to planners being regulated by this legislation. The current project is in no way intended to result in a decision on whether the planning profession should be regulated under the PGA; but rather to gather and analyze information regarding the pros and cons of such a move should it occur, and to provide a comprehensive review to the Board to further inform future decision-making.

A comprehensive approach to professional governance was developed to engage and educate the membership, including numerous activities that have now been completed:

- ✓ Initial engagement survey with PIBC membership;
- ✓ Discussions with other organizations operating under the PGA or similar legislation;

- ✓ Publication of articles in *Planning West* (see Fall 2024 and Spring, Summer and Fall 2025 issues);
- ✓ Initial webinar introducing the Project;
- ✓ Session at the annual PIBC conference; and
- ✓ Consultation with PIBC membership through focus group sessions.

As previously reported, PIBC retained the services of The Regulator's Practice to undertake a strategic assessment of professional governance for the planning profession in BC. Their work includes background research, preparation and facilitation of nine focus groups, and an overall synthesis and integration of all research and information gleaned from the membership and elsewhere (see **Figure 1: Focus Group Process**).

Focus groups were completed in the Fall of 2025. A request for participation was issued to the PIBC membership in September, resulting in 93 responses. In the end, 69 members participated in a total of nine focus groups.

Figure 1: Focus Group Process

