

# Celebrating the Profession, Celebrating our Communities

Kristin Agnello RPP, MCIP

World Urbanism Day, also known as "World Town Planning Day," was founded in 1949 to advance public and professional interest in planning and its activities. Celebrated in more than 30 countries across four continents, it is a day to celebrate and recognize the role of planners in creating livable communities around the globe.

Members from across British Columbia and Yukon gathered to celebrate on November 4, 2023, at the Sheraton Wall Centre in Vancouver. It was a night to congratulate those who have served as Certified members for 25 years or more, to welcome new – and new to BC – members, and to recognize PIBC's newest Honorary member, Harold Steves.

Harold Steves is a prominent figure in British Columbia's political landscape, long recognized for his advocacy regarding sustainable agriculture, land conservation, and the preservation of agricultural communities. A farmer-turned-politician, Steves collaborated with other activists and legislators to create the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), currently commemorating its 50th anniversary. The ALR was designed to prioritize the preservation and sustainability of BC's rural communities and agricultural industry. With its vast expanse of more than 4.7 million hectares, the ALR plays a crucial role in supporting local economies, ensuring food security, and preserving farmland for future generations. By limiting non-agricultural uses, urban sprawl, and industrial development on land that has been designated for agriculture, the ALR aims to support agriculture and, in doing so, maintain a stable and secure food supply, and protect the economic and environmental benefits associated with farming.

Sustainable land management techniques are essential to the preservation of robust ecosystems. By protecting agricultural land, the ALR contributes to biodiversity preservation and environmental conservation, provides ecological support, safeguards watersheds, and helps sustain important ecosystems. The ALR also encourages sustainable farming practices, such as organic and regenerative agriculture, that promote soil health and reduce environmental impacts. Like all major land use initiatives, the ALR has not been without challenges; balancing competing land use interests while ensuring the long-term sustainability of BC's agricultural sector remains a complex task.







Steves understood the delicate balance between urbanization and environmental preservation. He had a vision for BC to be comprised of “cities in a sea of green” and advocated for the assembly of lands that would lay the foundation for the creation of a regional park network large enough to support a growing population. Steves has consistently advocated for smarter growth policies that protect natural landscapes, habitats, and ecosystems, and has been a vocal opponent of urban sprawl.

Steve's story is an ardent reminder of the power community members have in shaping the future of our province. They are our partners, our interest holders, and – occasionally – our adversaries. But, by actively engaging community members in the decision-making process, planners can tap into local knowledge, promote civic engagement, support equity, generate innovative solutions, and build trust and transparency. In partnering with community members, planners can expand the impact of policies and increase the resiliency of our communities.

These are important reminders as we move forward into a new year and, in BC, new legislation that changes the local government land use planning landscape. As host, Nola Kilmartin, and PIBC President, Emilie K. Adin, both noted, with change comes uncertainty – both for planners and for community members. While some planners are welcoming of the new housing legislation, others are concerned about the impacts the new rules might have on the future of their communities. But planners are master navigators of policy, regulation, and legislation and offer not just



technocratic expertise, but a connection with a community and its members to ensure that no one is left behind. World Town Planning Day reminds us that we can lean on our planning colleagues to share information, navigate change, and improve outcomes in our own communities. Drawing from our community of practice, the Spring 2024 issue of *Planning West* will include perspectives on housing, including reflections on the Province's new housing legislation, from practitioners across the region. Articles will be accepted until March 15, 2024 and we welcome submissions from all PIBC members, including those in rural and northern communities.

As we celebrate the 74th annual World Town Planning Day – congratulating senior members and welcoming new ones – it is clear that the future of our communities – and of planning's role in that future – is ever changing. I, for one, am grateful to be part of a community of practice with which I can navigate the future.

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*The Planning Institute of British Columbia (PIBC) recognizes, acknowledges, and appreciates that we live, work, and learn on the traditional territories of the Indigenous peoples of BC and Yukon. Acknowledging the principles of truth and reconciliation, we recognize and respect the history, languages, and cultures of the First Nations, Metis, Inuit, and all Indigenous peoples of Canada whose relationship with the land continues to this day.*





# Reflecting on World Town Planning Day

Nola Kilmartin RPP, MCIP, MUP

On November 4, I had the honour of hosting the 2023 PIBC World Town Planning Day Gala in Vancouver. This was actually my second PIBC hosting gig of the year, having chaired and emceed the 2023 PIBC Conference in Sun Peaks back in May. These annual events recognize the contributions planners make to their communities, which is important to do.

The end of 2023 has been wild for our profession in BC. We have likely seen more changes to planning legislation at the end of this year than we have in a generation. Seeing the pace at which the planning landscape is shifting around us compelled me to reexamine how I contribute to my community and to the profession.

After almost a decade of working in private consulting, I am returning to public service to work for the fastest-growing city in Canada. As I write this, I am wrapping up my first week as Chief Planner for the City of Kelowna. Amidst this professional change, I was asked by PIBC to write an article “about World Town Planning Day”. To be honest, I am going to go a bit off-script. But before I do, let me tell you why.

I attend the same seminars, read the same articles, and scan the same social media posts as any other planner would do. Like you, the content I consume is heavily focused on the housing crisis, homeless encampments, development problems, municipal lawsuits, environmental concerns, frustrated councils, and outraged citizens. This day-to-day reality of our industry news is at odds with the self-congratulatory pats on the back that we bestow upon each other every World Town Planning Day. The nagging question in my mind is this: How can we be sure, as a profession and as individuals, that we are moving the needle towards making our communities demonstrably better?

As a planner freshly moving from overseeing a consulting team to managing a municipal department, I am taking this as an opportunity to itemize some of the measures municipalities can take to improve the delivery of housing. Frankly, I think we can all do better. We need to remember perfection is not the goal, housing supply is.

Here are some measures we can take:

1. ***Be a responsible and accountable partner.***

The people walking up to the front counter, submitting applications, and asking for

your help and guidance are your partners in achieving the goal of increased housing supply. Treat them as the crucial partners they are. Operations must be done in a way that supports housing delivery and affordability. Supporting applicants should not be interpreted as an unfair expectation or an ethical issue. It is core to the service we provide and the value we bring.

2. ***Establish service timeline targets with your teams.***

Delays impact housing affordability. Within your administration, identify where the bottlenecks are and resolve them. Timely approvals can reduce delays, increase efficiency, and provide certainty for developers, allowing them to move forward with their projects and ultimately increase housing supply.

3. ***Streamline applications.***

Reduce the sunken upfront consultant costs to applicants by reducing requirements. Standardize your technical review of applications and limit reviews to only what is required. This will allow the applicant to adjust plans more nimbly once they have land use approval. This is important when developers are responding to market changes and dealing with financing.

4. ***Improve development information and features.***

Some of the planning features that municipalities provide include e-services, guidance (novice/expert), key document availability, quality of information, and accountability. These features help streamline the land development application process and ensure that all parties involved have access to the information and resources they need to make informed decisions. For example, the City of Kelowna has been making incredible progress on the practical application of AI to support the development process.

5. ***Evaluate incentives and charges.***

Consider adjusting your fees based on context, location, and typology. Also, determine if your municipality needs to improve incentives for developments that include affordable housing units, desired density, or other strategic priorities.

6. ***Reduce development permits and variances before Council.***



Establish a policy and process for how planners and development officers will consult with the neighbours of proposed developments, with an aim to effectively resolve actual issues, and build trust and consensus. Councils should be governing and setting the vision for the community and administration, not discussing variances.

7. ***Update the community engagement process.***

With the new planning legislation – and public hearings being prohibited in some cases – take a critical look at how your team is going to consult with the community on plan amendments and rezonings. Support less experienced applicants trying to build missing middle infill housing through the development process and provide guidance on engagement. The profit margins are often tight on these projects, and delays from a misstep can mean financial ruin.

While exploring ways to fix policies, processes, and procedures, remember that what we do can help real people in real ways. One of my most satisfying memories from early in my career came after I struggled through a challenging rezoning for an affordable multi-family infill. One cold evening, 18 months after the project was approved, I biked past the new building, and it warmed my heart to see a glow in one of the windows – the lights were on, and a family was home!

So, when the next World Town Planning Day rolls around, let's all take stock of how our work and efforts tangibly made our towns and our world a better place.

Nola Kilmartin RPP, MCIP is the Chief Planner for the City of Kelowna.