

Objects of Proposed Local Government Board

Advice to Municipal Councils—System of Inspections—Control of Finance—Restraint on Councils—Should Deal With Grievances.

The Honorable the Attorney-General, J. W. DeB. Farris, has given out a statement in collaboration with the Inspector of Municipalities, Mr. Robert Baird, with regard to the objects of the local government board, which it is anticipated will be created at the next session of the Legislature. This memorandum, which has been spread before municipal officials and councils by the Union of British Columbia Municipalities, is thoughtfully prepared and is worthy of the close consideration of all those having at heart the best interests of municipal affairs in the Province. The memorandum says:

1. The creation of a central Board less cumbersome than the Legislature, through which the strict requirements of the statutes may be relaxed in particular cases.

The problem arising out of the conditions of the last six years have not yet been by any means settled and they cannot be all settled along the same lines nor can they all be settled on any general principles. A number of problems have already been dealt with, according to the merits of the particular case, but it will be some considerable time before the adjustments are all made and they can only be dealt with satisfactorily by a Board specially equipped for dealing with these questions. There has always been the complaint that the statutes are too narrow and too rigid, but the Legislature in this Province, as in other Provinces, has always been slow to grant broad powers which may be abused at the expense of the individual. As a partial remedy in many cases wider powers have been given with the reservation that their exercise must be subject to the approval of the Lieutenant-Governor in Council, but the extent of the demands upon the time of the Lieutenant-Governor in Council in other respects does not allow full enquiry into more than a limited number of municipal questions.

2. The creation of a bureau for the purpose of giving general information and advisory assistance to municipal councils.

Municipal councils are invariably anxious to profit by the experience of other municipalities, and have always a keen desire to keep closely in touch with what other municipalities are doing and what they themselves can do. The activities of municipal councils for some years have been extremely restricted, but there is no doubt that in the near future they must of necessity be broadened, and it is important that there should be co-operation over the whole Province in dealing in a systematic way with the questions which may present themselves.

3. The adoption of a system of further inspection of municipal offices, changes both in the members of the whole Province in office routine and procedure at the disposal of each official.

With the very frequent changes that take place in municipal offices, changes both in the members of the council and in the officials, it is not uncommon to find an office entirely at sea in the matter of routine. Errors are made which cost substantial sums of money, and it is not always possible to obtain the required advice and assistance. It is suggested that an official of the local Government board should be available at regular intervals to supervise in a measure the general conduct of business in the municipality and to prevent the possibility of irregular work being carried on for any length of time. It is known that cases have occurred in the Province where practically all the proceedings for a number of years have been of the most irregular nature, and where it has been found impossible to support the assessments or tax levies or other proceedings of the council.

4. The providing of a general control over the financial undertakings of the municipalities.

It has become more or less of a byword with the press and the public generally in this Province to say that any financial troubles which now exist have resulted from lavish and indiscreet expenditures in the past. Statements along this line are almost invariably overdrawn. The waste of public money by municipal councils has not been as great as has sometimes been represented, but it is still true that there has been a considerable waste and over-expenditure, and it is also true that a great many undertakings have been entered upon without proper consideration and without proper safeguard. It would not be fair to say had a local Government board been in existence during the years in which these undertakings were entered upon, that all the troubles would have been avoided, but it is undoubtedly true that a proper board would have saved a very large amount of money and would have placed a great many of the undertakings of the municipalities on a much better basis. This is, perhaps, particularly true of public utilities and local improvements. In the case of local improvements there is no doubt that a board would at least have been inclined to enquire whether the properties against which the local improvements were charged were worth the amount of money which the municipality proposed to collect from them. A municipal council entering upon a legitimate undertaking on a proper basis can have no possible fears of too much control by an outside authority, but such undertakings as have proved disastrous in the past, the municipalities can very well afford to eliminate.

5. The restraint upon councils in the matter of handling municipal funds.

This is a power which would undoubtedly require exercise in a very few cases. There are a number of outstanding cases in the Province where municipal by-law monies and other trust funds have been diverted and wrongfully used. This feature requires no comment. Occurrences of this kind in the Province have not been frequent, but unquestionably none of them should have been allowed to take place.

6. Providing for the dealing with special grievances and for the holding of public enquiries.

At the present time this duty devolves upon the Legislature and the Lieutenant-Governor in Council and is of necessity very frequently discharged in an ex parte manner or very hurriedly. It is an impossibility for either the Legislature or the Lieutenant-Governor in Council to investigate exhaustively all the circumstances which may have a bearing upon the subject and there is no doubt that a great deal more satisfaction to municipal councils and to the public generally would result from the handling of these questions by a special board.

7. It is suggested that the local Government board should be a central bureau of registration for all municipal by-laws. At the present time they are registered in the county court and are accepted without perusal. It is submitted that a great advantage would result from the passing of these by-laws through the hands of some person who would peruse them and would in very frequent cases detect clerical and technical errors which in so many cases cause trouble at a later date. It is also submitted that it would be of considerable advantage to have available at some point, information as to how the different municipalities have dealt with their various problems as embodied in their by-laws. Appeals are frequently made by municipal councils to the inspector of municipalities for information as to how the problem they are dealing with has been handled by other municipalities, and if the inspector of municipalities were in possession of the by-laws of the other municipalities, he would be in a position to give valuable information.

These different points mentioned comprise the main body of the duties and powers of the proposed local Gov-