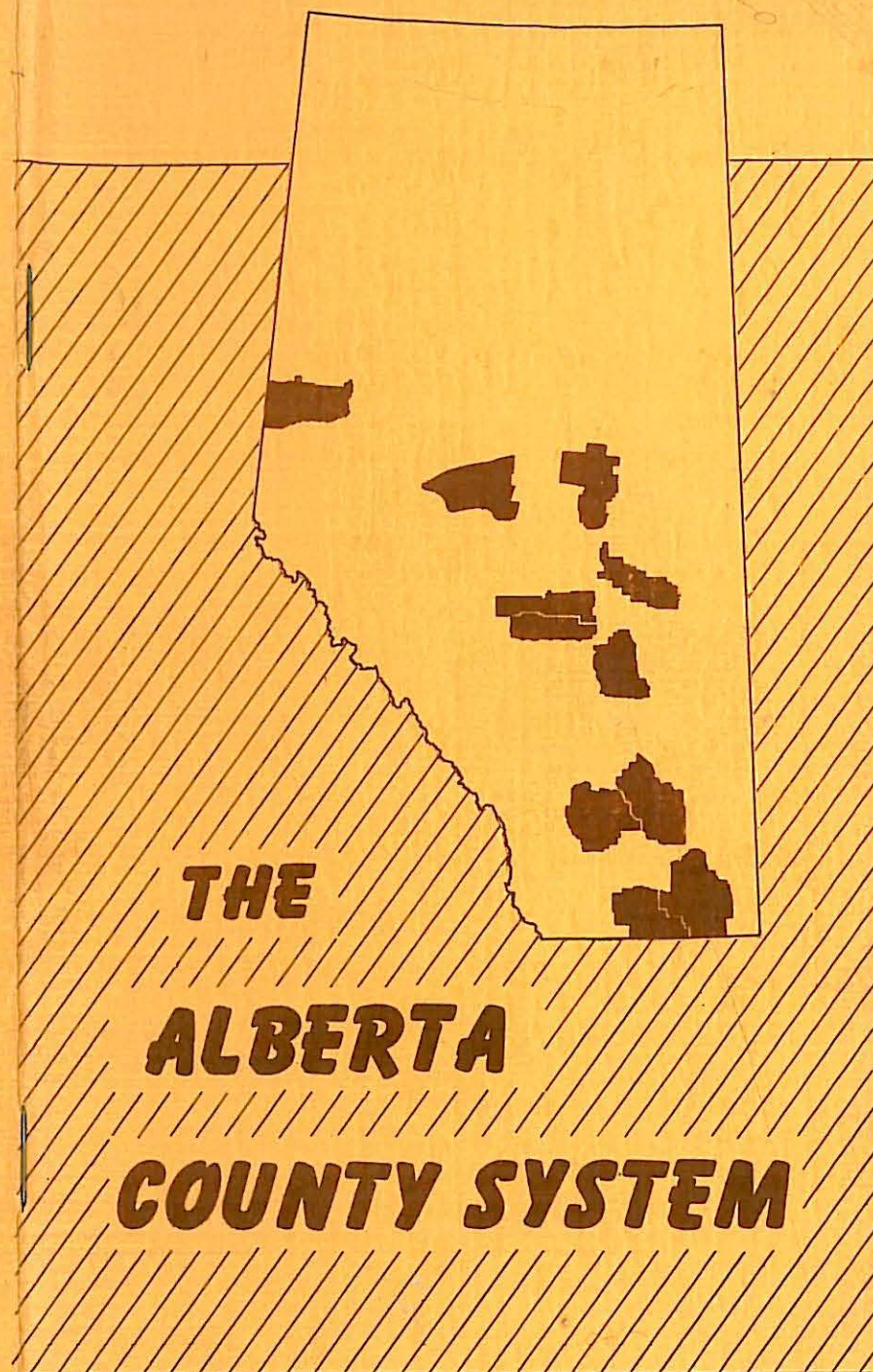


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THE
ALBERTA
COUNTY SYSTEM

A. J. Hooke

FOREWORD

THIS booklet has been prepared in answer to a growing demand for information about the County System as established in Alberta. At this date two large areas have been administered as counties for eight full years, eight others have been in operation for shorter periods of time, while two more have just been established.

The following pages outline some of the advantages of the Alberta County System and so the views expressed cannot be described as impartial. Nevertheless, we have endeavored to present the evidence of eight years' experience as it appears to us. No apology is necessary for being frankly enthusiastic because all evidence points to the County System as a most successful and efficient form of local government.

The enthusiasm of officials charged with the responsibility of administering the affairs of their respective counties is shared by the Provincial Government.

We take pleasure therefore in presenting this booklet to you and shall not disguise our hope that it will encourage action leading to the establishment of many more counties in Alberta. We sincerely believe the Province will be benefited thereby.

February 15, 1959

A. J. HOOKE
Minister

THE ALBERTA COUNTY SYSTEM

Single local governments for all local purposes were proposed for Alberta as early as 1945, but it was in November of 1949 that the new system was discussed seriously as a desirable change in municipal administration in this Province.

First reactions were rather favorable. The main tide changed quickly, however, and soon the proposal was being attacked (and defended) with utmost vigor. Critics described it as "an attempt by the Department of Municipal Affairs to take over the running of school districts", as a plan "to centralize and regiment the entire Province into counties" or more tersely as "dictatorial centralization". Because it was to be tried on an experimental basis, the first few municipalities requesting the change-over were of course called "guinea pigs".

Outside the Legislature, opposition to the Alberta County System was concentrated among school teachers (who felt they would rather deal with a local school board than a county council) and in school trustees (who saw in it "an attempt to destroy their independence" and "the deterioration of school affairs in favor of roads, sidewalks and other public services"). Individuals were certain that counties would mean increased taxes, the loss of contact with their local councils, decreasing importance of elected officials, reduced services and even their own disfranchisement.

Bill No. 50, which opened the way for the

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county system in Alberta, was criticised in the press and vigorously opposed at every stage in the Legislature. Nevertheless, it was assented to April 5th, 1950, and came into force on July 1 of that same year.

Enough time has passed and enough experience gained for the people of Alberta to judge how the county system has worked out, but before venturing a final opinion, it might be well to review some of the chief reasons in its favor.

The Question of Size

Since its inauguration, the Province of Alberta has been noted for the progressive development of its system of local government. The local administrative unit began even as a single township and gradually increased to nine townships by 1912 where it remained static for many years. Beginning in 1940 most of Alberta's rural municipalities were enlarged, some a little and others to cover as many as sixty or more townships. By 1950 it was thought the municipal districts were generally large enough for efficient and economic administration without being unwieldy or without straining the relationship between councillors and ratepayers. Then came The County Act. Designed to establish the enlarged units on a permanent basis, the county system was called "the final logical step in the evolution of local government" in Alberta.

Boundaries

The County Act originally contemplated

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the amalgamation of municipal, school and hospital administration under one body. Unfortunately the municipal hospital districts were left out, although a compromise solution has since been adopted. As it is now, a county is entitled to membership on municipal hospital boards according to the relationship its area bears to the whole district. Consequently, where the major part of the hospital district lies within the county, members of the hospital committee of the county council constitute a majority of the hospital district board. Hospital board policy thus becomes a function of the hospital committee and through it of general county administration.

At this point it should be recalled that, beginning some years before the enlargement of municipal districts, Alberta's small school divisions and the enlarged municipal districts were formed chiefly by combining a number of small units of each, there was little chance that their final boundaries coincided. After the passing of The County Act, the work of setting boundaries common to school divisions and enlarged municipal districts was undertaken by the Co-terminous Boundary Commission.

Not concerned with boundaries of municipal hospital districts, the Commission spent two years on its task, negotiating with municipal councils, school authorities and other interested groups.

The work of the Commission, completed in 1955, removed much of the confusion caused

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by overlapping boundaries. More than that, it cleared the way for converting municipalities and school divisions to the county form of government where a desire for such change may be indicated.

A Single Government

The chief characteristic of the county system is that it combines all local governments (municipal councils, school boards and under special circumstances, hospital administration) into a single authority for all local purposes. Early critics feared that this meant the abolition of local authority over school or municipal matters according to their point of view, but years of experience have disproved the claim. Lessening of local authority is not involved, but rather the bringing together into a single council those separate bodies which at times may be working at cross purposes.

Prior to 1931 local councils and school boards levied taxes and collected them independently. This resulted in many serious problems, particularly where taxes fell into arrears, so in 1931 municipalities were authorized to levy and collect revenues for school purposes as well as their own, with the school boards obtaining their funds by means of requisitions made upon the municipal councils.

Here was an improvement, but the amount of requisition deemed necessary by many school boards (made without thought of its effect on the mill rate) was often a source of friction. Many considered it was unfair that the school

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board should have unlimited power without responsibility for tax rates. A further change was made in 1948 when conditions were placed on the increase of a requisition over the preceding year, and while this was a long step forward, it cannot be said that the problem was solved.

No such criticism can be directed against the county system. Under it the school committee exercises the authority of the old school board but at the same time, as a part of the full county council, it carries full responsibility for the tax level. Both major committees are concerned with the problems and the administration of their district as a whole and must give full consideration to the respective merits of each type of expenditure.

The twin aspects of local autonomy — authority and responsibility — should never be divided. The county system combines them most effectively.

Borrowing

Then there is the question of current financing. Where the two authorities are separate, it may happen that the school board has to borrow money to carry it over until the first installment on its requisition is received . . . even while the municipal receipts are building up a surplus.

Alberta counties, on the other hand, have little need for such recourses because they are under no stress in dealing with separate expenditures. Central control of all funds for any

purpose, and direct access to capital where necessary through the Municipal Financing Corporation, makes the county an ideal instrument for this particular aspect of local government. In other words, The County Act places all money at the disposal of all committees and if borrowing is necessary it will be done by the county as a whole.

Overall Planning

In a 1950 broadcast Hon. C. E. Gerhart (as Minister of Municipal Affairs) made this statement: "At the present time the municipal councils make their plans, pass their budgets, build their roads and spend all their money, and the school boards don't know a thing about it. The roads are often built in the wrong places, school van roads can't be built in the fall because the councillors spent all their money during the summer.

"On the other hand, the school board centralizes its schools, designs its school van routes and never consults the council."

True then, this observation is equally true today.

Lack of a co-ordinated program is impossible under the Alberta county system. Different committees of the same local government sit around the same table and when discussion is concluded there is no doubt that every problem has been solved with consideration for all factors. The overall responsibility cannot be divided: each councillor must answer to his

electors for both schools and roads, and in practice the total program is the result of advice and assistance from all members regardless of the committee for which they are selected.

No Special Interests

Some people, primarily concerned with education, take the view that any amount spent on schools is well spent. School trustees, they say, should not be concerned with rates of taxation nor with levying or collecting problems. Others sincerely believe school expenditures should be kept to a minimum, demanding greater attention to public works.

Authority and interest divided in this manner discourages local solidarity. Where this is true, the county system will reverse the trend because it places equal emphasis on education and public works. Overall interests are placed ahead of any special interest; a well-rounded program serves the best interests of the entire community.

In counties members of the council need not consider themselves as either road-builders or educationists, but as administrators charged with formulating policies which will carry out the wishes of their ratepayers.

Facing Responsibility

It seems fair to say that independent authorities for school, hospital and municipal administration are unwilling to accept responsibility for high costs, waste, lack of service, in-

creased debt or rising mill rates. As a result, taxpayers may be misinformed or confused.

Because the county system lays the responsibility for results at the door of a single authority every member of the council must answer for possible lack of satisfaction to their electors. As a single body, the council itself takes the blame . . . or the credit.

Budgeting

Where local authority is divided, the school board prepares its budget for the current year and requisitions the municipal council for the amount required. Regardless of the effect on expenditures in other fields this requisition must be paid. Needless to say the total often necessitates sharp curtailment of essential public works or, alternatively, an increase in the mill rate.

In counties each committee submits its yearly estimates to the county council and these are scrutinized for their effect on the total budget. Estimates of the various committees may be reduced, increased or returned for further consideration and when the final estimates are approved, the full council adopts the budget. Even then, there is a flexibility under special circumstances which is virtually impossible under any other system.

Of major importance here too is the fact that ratepayers can see at a glance how much their schools and municipal services are costing them. And because all grants or revenues shared by the Province are paid to the county, the impact of such payments is also clarified.

Summing Up

Further repetition of advantages credited to the county system should not be necessary. Most of them are self-evident and have been borne out and tested through years of experience in counties now operating successfully in widely scattered sections of Alberta. While economy of administration is a factor, the main emphasis should be placed on the greater value obtained for each tax dollar. That is to say, counties may not spend less, but they get more for their money. It is allocated fairly in the interests of all.

In counties, with one local government for all local purposes, the council is responsible for every policy. Ratepayers know how much each of their services is costing them. From an internal standpoint, each committee knows what the others are doing and (of equal importance) how much is being spent. Again, borrowing by one committee isn't necessary when there are funds in reserve . . . and finally, the levying and collection of taxes are decided by the same people who authorize their spending.

In a word, where it has been tried over the past several years, the Alberta county system has removed most if not all of the problems common to any other system.

General Procedure

Proclaimed on July 1, 1950, The County Act made provision for establishing the new form of local government upon application from either the municipal district council or the school division board. No plebiscite is required at this

stage, but it is assumed that the group making the request has general support throughout the district.

Formerly four years after the county was formed, a mandatory plebiscite was held to give ratepayers a chance to express their views of its operation. Frankly, it was considered unlikely that having had four years' experience with the county system, a district would choose to revert to the old form. This assumption was justified where plebiscites were held, for while the voting was light in each case, a substantial majority has favored the continuance of the county system.

By an amendment made in 1958 it is no longer necessary to hold a mandatory plebiscite, but a plebiscite to determine whether or not the electors desire the continuation of the county system of government may be held if 10% of the proprietary electors petition the council for a vote, after four years of operation.

A further amendment in 1958 provided that arrangements can be made for the holding and conducting of an election of members of council for a proposed county before the date of the actual establishment of the county, provided that the order for the establishment of the county is published before the 10th day of October in any year. This means that application for county status should be forwarded to the government not later than the middle of September.

However, applications for county status may be made at any time, and, in the normal course of events, after preliminary steps have

been completed, a new election is held of not more than eleven councillors, one of whom is chosen chairman at the first meeting. At the same time, the whole council is divided into committees: for municipal affairs, for school and (if the whole or greater part of a hospital district lies within the county boundaries) for hospital administration.

Another amendment in 1958 makes it possible for school districts lying outside the county boundaries proper to be included in the County for school administration purposes only.

In the main each committee exercises the same powers as the corresponding authority under the regular system. For example, school committees administer school legislation under the Minister of Education, hospital committees work with the local hospital board under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Health and municipal committees administer municipal laws under the Department of Municipal Affairs.

Chief exception to this rule is that borrowing money and passing by-laws must be done by the county council. Further rights which can be reserved to the whole council might include determination of school van routes, snow plowing and the centralization of schools.

The usual number of councillors on each committee is three or five, but the two major committees may consist of the entire council. To provide town and village school districts, (and school districts outside the county but included for school administration purposes only), with representation, not more than one

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ratepayer from each of three such town, village, or outside school districts may be elected to the school committee. These are voting members of the school committee but are not members of the county council. Where more than three towns, villages, or areas included for school administration purposes only are involved, representation must be on a rotation basis, and while this is a compromise solution to a difficult problem, it seems necessary if these school districts are to have a voice in school affairs.

Each committee holds a monthly meeting and conducts its business in the usual manner. Minutes are kept and copies are made for each councillor so that all will know what is being done.

County History

In spite of the controversy which accompanied the passing of The Alberta County Act, there was little delay in setting up the first two counties in Alberta. First intimation that they favored the county system came from Grande Prairie so it became County No. 1 on January 1, 1951. A resolution requesting county status followed quickly from Vulcan which became County No. 2 on the same date. On January 1, 1952, the County of Ponoka No. 3 was established and the following year Newell became County No. 4. The County of Warner No. 5 dates from January 1, 1954, and on January 1, 1955, the County of Stettler No. 6 and the County of Thorhild No. 7 were formed. Three more counties were established on January 1, 1958. These are Forty Mile, No. 8, Beaver No.

9 and Wetaskiwin No. 10. Barrhead No. 11 and Athabasca No. 12 were formed in 1959.

If it were necessary, special reasons for each district adopting the new type of government could no doubt be found, but generally speaking, it may be said that respective officials discerned the solution to old problems in the new status. When the municipal councils and school boards were dissolved many of those who had been serving the community were returned to office. Assets such as buildings belonging to either authority simply became county property and debentures standing in the name of school districts were assumed by the new county as a matter of course.

In Their Own Words

Perhaps the best evidence of the successful operation of the county system in Alberta is provided by men who helped to set them up and operate them. Here, then, are carefully considered views of men who by their own experience are in a position to know the facts:

"With the coming of the county we find much more activity in road building and more interest in municipal affairs by the people, although this interest is not always favorable.

"There has been no decrease in interest in schools. Councillors regard both schools and roads as their responsibility and probably show more courage in attacking problems than members of the school division ever did . . . Because of their independence in road planning, they also show more initiative in their school administration."

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"I can state from experience that the county offers a better means of educating people in local government. Under the older system, too much time was wasted in fault-finding between the two bodies of government. Under the county system there is no way of dodging responsibility. The councillor is definitely responsible for all local government."

* * *

"School representatives have an influence in the whole field of local government. They even assist in social welfare, health and taxation. They definitely have a strong voice in public works recommendations."

* * *

"By and large, the school committee administers the School Act and the Department of Education regulations almost identically with the behavior of a school board in a divisional set-up. This being the case, there is of course very little difference in the type of service provided by the counties and that provided by a school division.

"In matters of roadbuilding, gravelling, snow plowing, provision of school and school vaning facilities, a council which is solely responsible for all these services is more sensitive to public opinion and provides a better service than in the case of the divided responsibility.

"School services have benefited under the county form of local government."

* * *

"The councillors appear to be quite happy with the general success we've had. Having

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local government services in one office helps the locally-elected official to keep closer contact with all problems. It also makes him more accessible to the ratepayers.

"The county system is definitely an improvement over the old system. It is keeping us up to date."

* * *

"In the actual operation of the county itself, I'm certain every one of our councillors will bear me out in the statement that its advantages far outweigh any disadvantages so much that it is hard to think of anything that can be called a disadvantage. Either we've been favored with an exceptionally good class of councillors, or the smooth operation of the county is the automatic result of the proper co-ordination of services, but we have very few problems actually.

"The bogey of the school side suffering under the county system is most certainly dispelled here, in fact all evidence points the opposite. The schools have never been kept in better condition, there has never been better service, and we have built an average of a new school a year.

"Municipally, I find that the joint services make it a lot easier to utilize otherwise seasonal crews; the better ones can be used for many jobs during the winter.

"I think the very fact that all members of the council sit and discuss all problems does a lot to stabilize the thinking of each councillor, and tends to bring about a tolerance that cannot be brought about in any other way."