

February 24, 2009

## How the new electoral district boundaries evolved

### Electoral districts

An electoral district (ED), also called a constituency or a riding, is a geographic area represented by a single Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). British Columbia is currently divided into 79 EDs, the names and boundaries of which are established by the *Electoral Districts Act* (1999).

On April 14, 2009, the day the writs are issued for the 39<sup>th</sup> Provincial General Election and second Referendum on Electoral Reform, a new *Electoral Districts Act* will come into force, increasing the number of EDs to 85.

### Why boundaries change

Because of shifts in the provincial population, the number of British Columbians represented by each MLA can change over time. Some ED populations grow rapidly, while others remain stable and still others grow smaller. For this reason, the boundaries of the province's EDs are periodically reviewed and adjusted to ensure that each MLA represents a similar number of people – a fundamental democratic principle known as representation by population.

The review of ED boundaries is governed by the *Electoral Boundaries Commission Act*. Under the Act, an independent electoral boundaries commission is established after every second election to consult with the public, and to make proposals as to the area, names and boundaries of the province's EDs.

The commission's proposals must achieve the principle of representation by population – except where 'very special circumstances' are deemed to exist – and respect the geography, demographics, history and community interests of British Columbians.

After consulting with the public, the commission submits its proposals to the Legislative Assembly. The Legislative Assembly may reject, approve, or approve with alterations the commission's proposals.

### The most recent BC Electoral Boundaries Commission

The most recent commission was established on December 13, 2005. In accordance with the *Electoral Boundaries Commission Act*, the commission comprised a judge of the B.C. Supreme Court, the Honourable Mr. Justice Bruce Cohen, the Chief Electoral Officer, Harry Neufeld, and a member of the public not employed by the government, Stewart Ladyman. The commission was tasked with proposing two sets of boundaries; one for EDs for the current single member plurality (SMP) electoral system, and a second for EDs for the proposed B.C. single transferable vote (BC-STV) electoral system.

The commission held a round of initial public consultations across the province to gather input regarding community history, transportation and

communications challenges, connections between specific communities and boundary setting.

Combining this input with population data from the 2006 Census, the commission used the Commission Redistricting Tool, a specialized computer application developed by Elections Canada, to propose 81 SMP EDs and 20 BC-STV EDs.

The 81 proposed SMP EDs represented a net increase of two over the current 79 EDs. Five additional EDs were proposed in the Lower Mainland and the Okanagan, while three fewer EDs were proposed in the North, Cariboo-Thompson and Kootenay regions.

On August 15, 2007, the commission submitted its proposals in the form of a Preliminary Report. In accordance with the *Electoral Boundaries Commission Act*, the commission began a series of public hearings to receive feedback on its proposals. Several of the hearings were well attended, with the commission's Prince George hearing drawing hundreds of attendees and dozens of speakers.

#### *Electoral Boundaries Commission Amendment Act, 2007*

On October 24, 2007, Bill 39, the *Electoral Boundaries Commission Amendment Act, 2007*, was introduced. It would have changed the commission's mandate to preserve the existing EDs in the North, Cariboo-Thompson and Kootenay regions and required that the overall number of SMP EDs be increased to 87 from 79.

In anticipation that Bill 39 would be enacted, the commission prepared scenarios that would meet the new requirements. However, the bill did not pass, and the commission returned to work under its original mandate.

#### *Amendments to the Preliminary Report*

The commission submitted a final report entitled *Amendments to the Preliminary Report* on February 14, 2008. The amendments contained proposals for 83 SMP EDs and 20 BC-STV EDs. The commission proposed that one ED be restored in the Kootenay region, but maintained that the number of EDs in the North and Cariboo-Thompson regions be reduced. As the commission noted, "our understanding of our statutory and constitutional mandate precluded us from adopting the suggestions [to restore the rural EDs] urged upon us."

In an appendix to its *Amendments to the Preliminary Report*, the commission included the Bill 39 scenarios it had prepared. Then, having fulfilled its mandate, the commission closed its office at the end of March, 2008.

#### *New electoral districts passed into law*

After considering the commission's proposals, the Legislative Assembly passed the *Electoral Districts Act* (2008). It received Royal Assent on May 1, 2008. The Act establishes 85 new SMP EDs for British Columbia, 77 of which are based on the commission's proposals and eight of which are based on its Bill 39 scenarios. The number of EDs in the North, Cariboo-Thompson and Kootenay

regions will remain the same, while the number of EDs in the rest of the province will increase by six.

The 85 new EDs will come into force on April 14, 2009, the day the writs are issued for the scheduled May 12, 2009 General Election and Referendum on Electoral Reform.

#### Implementing the new electoral district boundaries

Elections BC is responsible for implementing the new ED boundaries established by the *Electoral Districts Act* (2008). Although advances in technology have automated some aspects of the process, the implementation of new ED boundaries remains complex and multi-stage.

A major component of a redistribution is the review and adjustment of voting area (VA) boundaries. EDs are divided into VAs for the purpose of assigning voters to voting places, with each voting area corresponding to one voting station and one ballot box in a single voting place. VA populations are capped at 400 voters, a legislative prescript based on the maximum number of votes a voting officer and voting clerk can administer in one day.

Elections BC staff mapped over 10,000 VAs. To ensure the integrity of the voting area boundaries, mapping staff carefully examined the boundaries of each VA, reviewing their alignment in detail and resolving any issues. These efforts were complemented by further review by local District Electoral Officers and their deputies in each ED.

New ED and VA boundaries mean new maps and products must be created. Beginning in the summer of 2008, Elections BC prepared provincial wall maps of the new EDs, a Location Index including an ED map book, wall maps of individual EDs showing VA boundaries, a street index for each ED indicating the VA for each address range and a conversion table indicating the correspondence of VAs from the former set of ED and VA boundaries to the new set. In total, more than 800 map products were created by Elections BC staff.

A redistribution also requires Elections BC to update its relationship with external data providers, and to modify its web-based applications, including the Know Your Electoral District and Online Voter Registration tools. The new ED and VA boundaries must also be imported into the Electoral Information System (EIS), the database used to support the administration of provincial electoral events.

In addition, Elections BC must ensure that all of the province's existing constituency associations are de-registered, as well as support the registration of new constituency associations under the new ED boundaries.

By the time of the 2009 General Election and Referendum on Electoral Reform, the transition from 79 to 85 EDs will be complete. The result of a three-and-a-half year process, the new ED boundaries will likely be in place for two general elections, after which a new electoral boundaries commission will be appointed and the process will start again.

For more information, visit Elections BC's website at [www.elections.bc.ca](http://www.elections.bc.ca)