Civic Government, Past, Present, and Future
Transcribed by Jennifer Bolstler, Vancouver Island University - December 2014.

The following address was presented by Alderman Mrs. G.L. Hall before Nanaimo Historical Society, Tuesday November 20th, 1973

Her subject - City government past, present, and future.
The speaker was introduced by Mrs. Emily Kneen, and thanks for the interesting address by Mrs. Douglas M Phillips.

EK: Our speaker this evening hardly requires an introduction to the residents of Nanaimo. She has served this community well and long. Born in Halifax, Nova Scotia she moved the family moved to Montreal when she was 6. All her education was in Montreal and she graduated from the University of McGill in 1923. Following which she taught five years before marrying Dr. Allan Hall. First coming to Nanaimo in 1929 for a short time, then moved to the United States while the Dr. pursued further study. Returned to Nanaimo in 1933 where she has resided ever since. She was first elected to the city council in 1953 and served until 1956. Again she was elected to council in 1966 and is just starting her seventh year, topping the polls this year and previously.

[applause]

On council she has served as finance chairman ever since she was elected in 1966. She was elected to the regional district council three years ago and still retains that seat. As government representative she is vice-chairman of the Nanaimo regional hospital board. She is also a director of the Chamber of Commerce, and as a member of Malaspina chapter Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, served as vice president on both the provincial and national chapters.

Her subject this evening is civic government past present and future. Ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure that I present to you Mrs. Gertrude "Happy" Hall.

[applause]

GH: Thank you very much, Emily. Madam President, officers, my fellow members, and guests here this evening. I'm always fairly impressed when I hear anyone introduce me; I think "I wish I knew that person. Sounds like she's pretty busy." And then finally I realize that it turns out to be myself and I feel very humble to think that over all the years I have been accepted in this community, to serve it, and help it in its growth. You know when you come from the East coast where everything is as your grandfather did it, it's nice to come here where I feel that we're sitting in the lap of history ourselves and we're helping to direct the future of our community, and indeed the whole of Vancouver Island.

When I talk to the historical society I think perhaps you have researched everything there is to know about Nanaimo and [chuckles] in fear and trembling I stand before you so I decided I wasn't going to talk about Nanaimo hardly at all until later, and I thought rather I would give you a few remarks that I have jotted down about local government, how it began and where
it began and so forth. but before I do that I was very interested listening to the minutes, and I might say that I'm not a proponent of women's lib, I don't stand here in the place of Willard Ireland I'm simply his substitute, we all feel very badly that he couldn't be with us tonight because he's such an able speaker. And I am sorry to hear that he is ill. But you know, uh whenever anyone calls on me to fill a spot, I'm willing and able to do it, but I thought afterwards what gall on my part perhaps because Saturday night was election night and if I didn't make it here I come to talk to you on Tuesday [laughter] about local government.
4:39
However, all's well that ends well, apparently. But Mrs. Phillips is researching the history of Commercial St. and there's just a little something that I happen to know that perhaps Mrs. Phillips might not be able to dig up and that concerns the Hall Block at 42 Commercial St. that I understand was a great big rock bluff and uh nobody thought it had any value at all. Dr. Hall Sr. my father-in-law decided that he would remove the bluff and build his clinic on the site which he did.

And they put in an iron fireman because, you must understand that I come from the era of the coal mines, we were engaged not by the company but by the miners and signed on, the miners signed on the Doctor's rules and they were our masters, and therefore we must use coal, so we had an iron fireman in the building until the mines were about ready to close and then Dr. Hall Sr. felt it was time that he could move along to oil. So he engaged the miner to come and dig behind the building because there was still rock there. And when he got busy digging behind it, and he got down in, he called Dr. Hall and said "What am I gonna do with all this coal?" and he ran into a coal seam, just a few feet down. And he took a number of tonnes of coal out in order to put in an oil tank, and I just [laughter] ...[inaudible]...That is a very interesting little side light uh of what happened to the history of coal miners and how oil took over right on commercial street. Uh they didn't carry coals to Newcastle they were already there.
6:19
I would like to talk to you a little bit about civic government and the need for some form of civic government has always been recognized and strong representative institutions of local government have been regarded as necessary for the health and permanence of the state. Canada has been no exception in this regard. The municipal level of government offers the best opportunity for the ordinary citizen to participate directly in public affairs, and to develop an insight into the processes of provincial and federal government as well. The latter being carried on at a great distance from the direct observation of the average citizen tends to be very obscure. But the services rendered by his local authorities whom he elects and whom he often knows personally touch him at a hundred points and well I know it. The citizen who keeps his eyes open can observe the operation of these services from day to day, and has the material and the opportunity to think about public affairs, to form judgement and to act thereon. In this sense local institutions are the laboratories of democracy.
The preservation and the strengthening of free local institutions is fundamental to the Canadian way of life, and the first step towards these ends is to secure a knowledge of their constitution and general operation. Although as far back as 1663, a mayor and two aldermen were elected by the citizens of a Quebec settlement, it was not until after the British occupation that true municipal institutions made their appearance in Canada. St John, New Brunswick was perhaps one of the first cities, being incorporated in 1785. Here in our own province of British Columbia, in 1860, New Westminster was the first municipality to receive a city charter. Victoria was incorporated in 1862 and Vancouver in 1886, and our own Nanaimo, as you know, in 1874.

Now, a municipal corporation is composed of all the inhabitants, all the rate-payers, and all the resident and tenant electors, with the mayor and council within a definite area set apart for municipal purposes by the provincial legislative assembly. The increase in the number and scope of municipal functions has paralleled the growth of Canadian economy. Some services, such as the provision of food, fuel and shelter has always been regarded except in special circumstances, as the responsibility of individuals. The local protection of persons and property in pioneer times was left to the head of the house. The bucket brigade was the forerunner of the fire department, while mothers were the only health department. Parks and playgrounds were private, even if they were open to the public.

But as conditions became more settled, municipal institutions gradually took over most of these operations upon a more effective basis. Until today the present functions include protection of persons and property, health and sanitary services, parks and recreation services, welfare services, communications, water, lighting, and power services. Education is another service, but is not administered by the municipal corporation. Under protection of persons and property come firefighting and prevention, policing and crime prevention, building and electrical inspection, and lighting of streets and parks. Under health and sanitation come public health and this is usually administered through a department of health.

Public baths, sewers, sewerage disposal, garbage removal, and street cleaning. Under communications come streets, roads, lanes, side-walks, and transportation and telephones. Water service is almost universally owned by the corporation, and operated by it directly or through a utilities commission. Here we have the greater Nanaimo water commission for Chase River, Harewood, Nanaimo, Northfield, Wellington, Departure Bay, and a similar commission has been created for a sewer system and now both of these are regional. This is an edict of the provincial government that this had to happen.

Some of the public utilities are obtained by contract with an individual, such as garbage, although we now have it under the region or a company or other public authority.

The term of office for the mayor and council is for two years here in Nanaimo. The use of overlapping two year terms, by which half of the aldermen retire annually, is designed to
ensure continuity of membership in council. A two year term allows an alderman to devote at least 18 months to disinterest of public service before he must begin to - what you say - mend his fences, if he wishes to be re-elected.

The mayor is elected for two years also. He has no separate power of veto or superior power of initiation of policy or of appointment, although he has general supervision over the administrative departments. The mayors in BC have the power to refer back to council, within a month of its passage, any bylaw or resolution not affirmed by a vote of the rate-payers, and compel council to reconsider it.

Capital finance, accounting, budget control, payment of accounts are usually found together under the city treasurer. The tax and other revenue collections are under a separate tax collective. The most important municipal document of the financial year is a current budget of estimated expenditures on civic services. It is important as a financial document, but is even more important as a plan of work for the following year. The general provisions of the BC Municipal Act govern the current budget procedures, and bylaws for most capital expenditures require the assent of the voters after approval by the department of municipal affairs.

12:36

Now, I think that sort of gives you a look at how we come to join in groups to be elected and to govern. And my purpose here tonight was just to acquaint you with this and that is in the past. You have had an eye on what's been going on but I want you to take a look into the future with me, and therefore I've brought the Nan Plan [Mann Plan?] down for you to have a look at and to the best of my ability, which is quite limited, to explain it to you, and why it came about, and the reason that the regional board has decided to try and put together a project that the citizens, both in Nanaimo and all the districts around us, could have a good look at it and to see why it was necessary.

We've had an uncontrolled growth pattern around us all this time, and we're getting more and more applications for shopping complexes and rezonings and so on, and for removal of industries and places for heavy industry and things of this nature. And so, the region decided that they would put together something like this plan here. Now this is what is currently taking place and has been over the years, and this is called a decentralized concept.

14:05

And while we look at it, it is rather blown up and so is the centralized concept which is what they hope Nanaimo may turn into.

But the things are larger than they are in reality and they're all colored so that you could understand where various things currently are, or are proposed in Nanaimo, without controls and so if you have a look at this later don't try to pick out the individual streets you live on or anything of that nature, these colors that're on there override.
Now this covers an area of 30 miles and it starts at the north end up here at Nanoose Overhead Bridge and it goes down to Mudtown which is down in Cedar. So that this covers the area that the provincial government is asking us to look at with amalgamation in mind and the Nan Plan is more or less being held in limbo because amalgamation is once more to be considered by us, and the provincial government have been up, they have interviewed, as you are probably aware, all the districts surrounding Nanaimo and Nanaimo itself. And Mr. Chris Woodward from the Department of Municipal Affairs was here and he tells us and carries a message from Mr. Lorimer that they would like us to strike this community of 15-20 people composed of three alderman, the director on the regional board from each of the surrounding areas around us; Northfield, Wellington, Departure Bay and so on, plus the chairman of the Fire and Water Works trustees associations in all these areas. And the administration the city and the regional district to go through all the questions that are going to be asked, and come up with some firm answers about assessments of the degree of areas where the assessments will change – all the questions that were not answered last time that we had an amalgamation go around which failed by .07 of 1%, incidentally.

This time it looks as if there will be no doubt that it'll go through. I don't suppose it's a shotgun marriage but it's something awfully close to it because if we don't do it ourselves, I think you may jolly well sure that it will be presented to us, I won't say forced, but it'll be presented to us, and they want us to get into this no later than I understand March or April.

Now the committee as yet hasn't been appointed by the provincial government but I think they were just waiting for the elections to get over, and they will be coming with all their ammunition for us to get going on this program. So the regional board, I don't know if any of you had these questionnaires that were circulated, Community Plan for Nanaimo, they took them around everywhere and they dropped them at every fifth house in Nanaimo and all the areas around us, and they had a number of questions on them to be filled in. They were trying to get a consensus of opinion of what you wanted in industry and the port, parks and recreation, the residential areas, transportation, commerce – where you wanted it, if you wanted it, and what you wanted to have on the waterfront. And they didn't get an awfully good response from that and then they had a display, if any of you saw it, of these proposals and a lot of other material down on Front St right near the villa. And these questionnaires were in there, this ballot, which I'm going to pass around to you after I get through talking with you. And see if you decide whether you like this one or whether you like that one.

But all told, it only came under a thousand people that took the trouble to answer, and sometimes they call back four and five times to a home, in order to get the expression of the people. And they held these public meetings in every one of the districts surrounding us and the City, so they're really working regionally to try to satisfy everybody, if they possibly can.
Now, in this [pause] the various zones the commercial is today the downtown core you can see this one, that is the commercial area and that is the heart of city and that is down, you know, harbour park and commercial street and all this particular area. And the people who are coming with application for very large shopping centers and so on, they want to decentralize and they are trying to get out of town. Here's one here, that's McGarrigle's gravel pit, they want to put something in there. Over 300,000 square feet for that one. This one up here is the same.

Here we have another commercial deal, and wherever you have a commercial deal, you will get residential densities around it because where there's a shopping center, like a neighbourhood shopping center, people want eventually to have high-rise apartments or medium density apartments, they want to be close to where they can nip out and do their shopping, and so it make quite a change to your city. The next thing is that they want, the heavy industry which is this lighter purple color. So many people, that's it right there and that is the controversial harbour situation, and the mills lie along there, and everybody seems to, a great majority of people, want it moved out of town. And so they're looking at the Harmac area out here, which is heavy industry right now. They they don't have much other choice for heavy industry, they simply want to get it out of the way.

All this color here, the sort of a light brown, that is single family areas where homes could go. The area that's in white, here, is all farmland, and it isn't touched at all. That's rural. Special uses, this is where exhibition park is and you can put certain things in there that don't fit into anything else. Light industry is just back of it running along here. This green belt is the golf course. Now, they would like all that you see green and they would like an area 20 or 30 feet along the highways be kept green.

They have marked in here a second roadway around Nanaimo, but there's another line that comes here which is the hydro transmission line at the moment, but the thought is that it would be a backup if we were to have a bypass or an alternate route back of the city, and they feel that that road, if it came and it's on this one too back here, right here, that we wouldn't have any development beyond that, it would be kept green belt on the side of the mountain and there would be absolutely no access, no gas stations, no hot dog stands, no facilities on this road if it comes back here. It is simply and truly a bypass for the city and it would start down here which is, here's the Chase River, and it would go down even beyond Chase River, might even come out down close to Ivy Green Park somewhere and totally and completely bypass it, and keep it that way. So it's, but the trouble with this plan is that these big shopping centers, this commercial deal here, and here there's another one that one is by Vic's at at Norwell Drive area there. These could be neighbourhood shopping centers if you turn to this plan over here.

Now if you'll just take a look at this, you'll see how very small that area is there, instead of this. Now, that area is on the corner of Hammond Bay Road, and if you want to keep your core of the centre downtown, right here, it remains practically the same. I'll just point out,
that's an error by the artist. They've got...uh... And that's where I live. Just across the bridge. Trust me to pick it out. I said "What's that doing marked that way. We've got the promenade down there and we have the yacht club. And we had all the controversy over the estuary. Are you going to turn it into commercial?" "Oh no," they said "please explain that that is an error in colouring by the people who did this in Vancouver".

But we would keep more of the commercial downtown with just small areas and those, that is the Terminal, here's Terminal and that's Northbrook and that's Vic's and that one up there would, if it's controlled, would just be a neighbourhood shopping centre, which isn't too bad because it would have a smaller density of multiple residential against this one, if you can see that one right there.

24:30
So that I'm not suggesting which is the better plan. This has the industry, light industry, I'm sorry heavy industry, out here at Harmac and this seems to be the thing, especially if we get amalgamation. We can hope to have Hooker, Harmac and all this heavy industry taxation coming into the city, and then there wouldn't be this quibble of whether it's in or it's out and who's getting the big shot of the tax monies. We would all be together and it would stop a lot of this parochial bickering that has taken place and continues to do so in spite of the best efforts of some people to forget about it. And when it touches your pocketbook you're very cognizant of where the industry and things are going.

But you know, I've been in Nanaimo a long time. I first saw Nanaimo on New Year's morning, 1929. I came from Montreal by train with Allan, we were just married on the 27th of December, and it was 30 below zero when we got married. We got on the train, and at that time it took four days and five nights to get out here. And coming down the Fraser Canyon, I'll never forget it, out of the snow, into the rain. We got to Vancouver on New Year's morning and it was the most dismal sight I ever saw; the streets were littered with all the whoop-de-do of New Year's Eve. And then we got on the boat and I was most impressed with the Elaine, which was like a little ocean liner, I couldn't think that that was just a ferry. And we approached Nanaimo and the sun came out, and I looked at Mt Benson, and I thought, "What a beautiful place to come to live" for we were simply passing through at that moment on our way to Alaska.

26:22
But Nanaimo has something, and it continues to have something. And when we came back here to live after we spent the winter in Cordova, Alaska, I was very pleased to come to Nanaimo and still thought it was a beautiful place to live. And then we went away for a number of years and came back again, and it was really in 1937 and we've been here ever since.

And I have a great interest in Nanaimo, but I'm glad that I knew Nanaimo in what I consider the Old Days when it was still four or five thousand people. And those of you who are sitting here today can certainly out point me on that, but just the same if I can say I was here in the 20's, even though it was the tail end of the 20's, you know often you hide these facts from
people especially if you’re a woman, you’re not supposed to admit you’ve been anywhere so long as that, but I’m proud. I can never be a native of this area, but I’m very proud to be a citizen, and to be regarded almost like a native daughter.

Now I could go on at greater lengths on this to you, but if this plan comes in and these roads are suggested because if it goes out Wakesiah and joins in over the top of Jingle Pot Road, and goes along this way and comes out, you're still going to have a bottleneck when you get out about Hammond Bay Road there. And so the planning seems to be that it would be nice to have two or three roads that you could take a choice and get your heavy stuff away from downtown, and make Commercial Street a mall or a mall, whichever way you like to call it, and have pedestrian activities going on downtown.

28:26
Fritz Schultz had a very excellent proposal of what to do with Commercial Street, and he removed all the sidewalks and moved the storefronts forward and had a skywalk from Simpson Sears over and coming down Commercial Street and joined the whole thing together and had another parking tower where the old bank was up at the corner there, and it was a pretty good idea. And this may still come to pass, something we should think about.

But in the meantime, whether we amalgamate or not, I think, I shouldn't really say it, but this plan proposes to keep urban sprawl away from us by controlling the merchants who would try to come in and grab large tracks of land against future development and put their things up and force the population growth in that area. And whether we like it or not, we're going to have this population coming to us, there's no way that we can escape it. But what we have to do is be prepared for it and to find the methods through zoning and so on to control what is going to happen to us. And I think we continue, could continue to have a very liveable place because once Nanaimo, always Nanaimo.

Now I'll, I'm going to just pass, if somebody will come and take these around for me. Maybe you'd just like – all it asks is which concept you'd prefer for Nanaimo's future: centralization, or decentralization?

30:12
And I have...
[voice]: Is there enough for everybody there?
GH: Oh, well, I think I've got fifty and I'm sure that's too many.
[voice]: [indistinct]
GH: And I have a few pencils here if you'd like to take them.
[shuffling]
GH: I hope you'll come up and have a look at this. My remarks to you are really finished if you'd like to, on that very short run through of what's going on here, if you'd like to ask me questions after. If can answer them I'd be only too happy to do it. But I thank you for the opportunity to come and speak with you, and as one of your members to enjoy meeting.
Usually my Tuesday nights are all taken up with the Regional Board. As a matter of fact, after I hesitantly said to Mr. Nicholls I would come, then I got the notice that we were having a very important Regional Board meeting tonight, and I was going to ask could I please speak first. As a gentleman suggested, sometimes your guest speakers do have other commitments, however the tenders for the rec, recreational complex did not come in until next week. So I was lucky. Thank you very much.

[applause]

Audience member 1: [indistinct] to ask you any questions?
GH: Yes, certainly.
Audience member 1: Um, if there are any people who'd like to ask Mrs. Hall any questions on the subject of her report tonight, she is quite ready to try to deal with them, she says.
GH: Or any other things doing with politics.
[indistinct muttering]

Audience member 2: Thank you. I was wondering now that you say approximately six months time, we may get this amalgamation through. In the meantime does a vote on this one or other of these concepts, does that sort of go along with it? Is that part of the package or is this something quite separate?
GH: No it's not part of the package at all, but it gives an indication to us on the Regional Board, the direction we should head in.
Audience member 2: What I was thinking was there are various developments in the works right now, aren't there...
GH: Well, that's what we're trying to control.
Audience member 2: I was thinking of the Harewood one [indistinct]
GH: Yes, that's right.
Audience member 2: So that could be right away before this one.
GH: Yes, some of them are being stalled, frankly, until we can get an answer.
Audience member 2: Yes, I see.
Audience member 3: They're going to do what they want, not what we want.
Audience member 4: [indistinct]
GH: No, this is a concept for a greater Nanaimo city. So we wouldn't presume to go beyond the portals of School District 68 to suggest that you be Nanaimo, but it's quite conceivable that a similar thing will take place between Parksville, French Creek, and Qualicum, in the not too distant future. This is already being talked about because once you get the mapping and the zoning in, and I understand Parksville now the mapping and the zoning is complete, then you will be able to, you will have controls, and you can proceed to develop areas, because at the present moment there aren't any controls about zoning. You can do almost what you like on your property. And that has been the big problem.

One of the things that was an awfully good example, in Nanoose for instance, when the Regional Board wanted to put the zoning in there after they had completed their mapping, the ratepayers were up in arms against it and turned it down absolutely flat at the vote, until they found out that they wanted to lease booming grounds near there. And then they came
flying back to the Regional Board, "Would you please hold another referendum, we have changed our minds, we want control so that we know what’s coming in here!" And so the second time around they voted in favour of the zoning so that could control and keep out the type of industries that they didn't wish to have in their area.

So people who go to live outside do so because they want to get away from all the restrictions, the high taxes and the conformity, and I for one certainly can't blame them, but there comes a time when you can't live in isolation, and pretty soon you want to live compatibly with your neighbour and not have him doing something or having something on his land that is obnoxious to his neighbours. So these isolationists are finding it very hard to conform and I do have sympathy with people who’ve moved away and want to live that way, but again, the population creeps upon them and they have to start conforming. That's about the size of it.

So it might be ten years in the coming, but those communities will gradually grow together because they're edging that way right now. And as a matter of fact, French Creek could swing the whole thing because they have the largest tax base. That's the thing.

Mr Barraclough: At this point Mrs. Hall continued to answer questions from the floor, and these were chiefly concerned with the Regional Districts plan in the Nanoose, Parksville, Qualicum, and Harewood districts. Adding a postscript to the tape recorded by Mrs. Hall, some items may be of interest to us. Mrs. Hall, will you continue please?

GH: Thank you, Mr. Barraclough. Following last week's meeting with you, the Regional Board held a meeting last night and at which time we were all appointed to various committees for the land commission public hearings, which are going to be held next week, there'll be one here in Nanaimo on Monday, December the third, and one on Wednesday December the fifth in Parksville.

Now these are very interesting. They're going to be an all-day thing from 9:30 in the morning through to 9:30 at night on both days, and all the regional directors are sitting in committee to receive the citizens who wish to query the decisions of the Land Commission and to find out which category their land falls into, and if they have any complaints. And already there are close to fifty complaints in of people wanting to have it clarified. And I think this is very fine thing and it follows some of the remarks that I did make to the group on the 20th regarding he Land Commission and the ability to appeal the decision and for clarification, so that things really are progressing.

Speaking of progress, I might also go back in history to the remarks I made about Dr. Hall Sr's building and the changeover from coal to oil. The rock bluff might be of interest to the old-timers here, but Mr. Jock MacKenzie was the chap who did the blasting of that bluff away, and Mr. Negrin was a local coal miner that Dr. Hall Sr. engaged to remove the coal from the area after it was blasted.
These are just small things. In talking to Allan, my husband, about this, he recalled to me that this building sits directly over the Douglas seam of coal which was one of the main seams that ran straight through the town and on up Commercial St, and to this day, the water continues to seep into the basement of that building from the old workings of the mine. And I think what is very interesting when it got further up the street I think it was up across from the Royal Bank in that building, that the washroom facilities were not hooked into the main sewers at that time. It went directly down the pipes into the old mine shaft [laughter] which caused quite a good deal of concern, particularly amongst the gentlemen who used the facilities.

Mr. Barraclough: Mrs. Hall, may I just interject for a moment?
GH: Yes
Mr. Barraclough: I've heard Mr. Jock MacKenzie tell me many years ago about Dr. Hall giving him the contract to blast the rock out of that block and then dump it in the ravine behind.
GH: Oh yes, the ravine at that time was not as it is today with the street running through it. And I do recall when I came that the railroad ran across Commercial St. with the slag from the mines and it was dumped across there to fill in the ravine behind.

Nanaimo was quite an interesting place to me because I came from the city of Montreal and I’d never really been in a small town before, and particularly out here on the west coast where so many of the buildings were built of wood in those days. It was of interest to me, as a matter of fact even then there was a housing shortage, we couldn't find any place to rent, and we had to live with Allan's parents in their home for a number of months until we could find a house to live in. We, finally Mrs. Weigle let us have her house at 721 Comox Road right next to the Benson's nurseries and the railroad tracks are, of course, just two doors away. And I'll never forget the first night I slept in there, I thought there was a train wreck coming right straight at me, because the train arrived and blew at the crossing and thundered on by, and I was left with a palpitating heart. I'd never lived in a little wooden house before! It was quite a shock to me.

But the thing that really interested me was, in driving around town I saw, on the street, all these small wooden little buildings and sheds and I couldn't understand what they were doing there, and Allan told me that these were the coal sheds and the coal was delivered to the homes in all these little sheds that stood particularly in the south end of town. I found this very fascinating.

Mr. Barraclough: Thank you, Mrs. Hall, for the recording.