



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Electoral Boundaries Commission
Public Hearings

Grande Prairie

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Electoral Boundaries Commission

Judge Ernest J.M. Walter, Chairman

Dr. Keith Archer
Peter Dobbie, QC
Brian Evans, QC
Allyson Jeffs

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Jim and Loretta Friesen
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[Judge Walter in the chair]

Ms Friesacher: The next presenter is Mr. Mike Frey, CFO of Grande Prairie-Smoky PC Constituency Association.

The Chair: Sir, for the record, since we're being recorded, if you would be so kind as to give your name and who you're speaking on behalf of here.

Mr. Frey: My name is Mike Frey. I'm the CFO for Grande Prairie-Smoky PC Constituency Association and also a citizen of the city of Grande Prairie.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

**Mike Frey, Grande Prairie-Smoky
Progressive Conservative Constituency Association**

Mr. Frey: Okay. I'd like to start with sort of a quote: if it ain't broke, don't fix it. The present alignment of the boundaries as they are is working well. As citizens of a region we need to be cognizant of the regional interdependencies under which we live and work. The urban residents need the support of the rural residents to provide a sound community environment, and the rural residents need the urban environment to be strong and productive so that the urban area can provide the many services to them that would not be available if there was not a healthy urban environment.

In addition, the distances that any MLA is required to cover must be manageable. The city of Grande Prairie at present benefits from having two MLAs representing the community. Both of the existing MLAs have their constituency offices in Grande Prairie, which allows the area with the largest population base easy access to their particular MLA. These MLAs continue to work on issues for the benefit of the whole region and give total support for initiatives regardless of the location of the project. The MLAs aren't concerned as to where the project is but just make sure it gets done.

The Grande Prairie chamber of commerce strongly supports the present boundary alignments, and recently the city of Grande Prairie has also voiced their concern that the riding's boundaries should be maintained.

The existing election process is usually a 28-day process. In the proposed Beaverlodge-Valleyview constituency it would make that election process extremely demanding for all candidates. They would spend more time travelling from location to location than they would spend in touch with the local constituents and trying to get their opinions in front of the constituents. Now, subsequent to the election the MLA that wins is going to continue to have that same problem.

The proposed Beaverlodge-Valleyview constituency would create an inequity in representation for the constituents. For example, I live in Grande Prairie. Right now I'm in Grande Prairie-Smoky. Under the new boundaries I'd be in Grande Prairie-Wapiti. One MLA could reside in Grande Prairie on 120th Avenue, and another MLA could reside in Grande Prairie on 90th Avenue. The Beaverlodge-Valleyview MLA would be required to cover a territory of some 320 kilometres from west to east. In addition to that, that MLA would be responsible for attending to the requests for meetings with municipalities and other organizations within the new constituency, including – including – those in the city of Grande Prairie because part of Grande Prairie would still be in his or her constituency. The Grande Prairie constituency MLA wouldn't have to leave home, basically, to fill his obligations.

In short, what we would soon see is that we would have one dead MLA, either from exhaustion or from a motor vehicle accident. Alternatively, you would have an MLA that does not adequately represent his constituents because it is physically impossible because of the distance that he must travel.

The existing boundary alignment for Grande Prairie-Smoky takes into consideration the boundaries of the MD of Greenview No. 16. Now, Fox Creek is surrounded by the MD of Greenview, and the two communities and municipalities have a variety of funding agreements between them. By transferring Fox Creek out of the constituency, the existing relationships and co-operation between these two municipal entities may be adversely affected.

Municipalities that are under financial stress, the way they usually are, will always look to try to minimize their costs and avoid having interdependencies with communities wherever they can. So should Fox Creek be removed, Greenview may decide that they won't participate in those cost-sharing arrangements, and it could create unnecessary complexity by involving two sets of MLAs in order to resolve some of these municipal and regional interdependencies.

In closing, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. The proposed Beaverlodge-Valleyview and the proposed Grande Prairie constituencies will result in different levels of representation for the constituents. The urban residents, because of the distances involved, would be well represented, but the rural representation would not be the same. As a result of that, the spirit of co-operation between urban and rural, that is now becoming more prevalent in this region, will be torpedoed.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Frey. We may have some questions here. In the interests of time we limit the questions to 10 minutes from the group of us.

Brian.

Mr. Evans: Thanks, Mr. Chairman, and thanks very much, Mr. Frey. You'll be happy to know that we've had similar themes throughout the presentations today. Just for clarity in terms of where you and your constituency association believe the boundaries should be if we were to revert to Grande Prairie-Smoky and Grande Prairie-Wapiti, I'd like to bring over to your table a map that was part of the county of Grande Prairie's presentation to us today. It moves the northwest and the southeast boundaries – I see Mr. Dobbie is giving you that map – out from where the boundaries are now.

Again, this came from the county, a suggestion, with the implication that it was likely supported by the city of Grande Prairie, but we really don't have that confirmed. Can you take a look at that map and just give us your comments on whether you feel that those would be good dividing points? I should say that the highway 43 division is consistent with the current boundaries but, again, not quite out so far.

6:00

Mr. Frey: It looks like it's just moved the west boundary two quarter sections.

Mr. Evans: It was actually east of the airport before. Down in the southeast section not all of these subdivisions would have been included in Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Frey: That's probably because of the annexation by the city of the airport area and to sort of get a straight line because it was kind of jagged. To get a straight line to go up, it makes it easier for people to know which constituency they're in.

Mr. Evans: I mean, if it works, it looks pretty recognizable, pretty easily recognizable.

Mr. Frey: Grande Prairie-Smoky isn't opposed to changes. We realize there has to be some modification. It's the drastic change that was proposed, and I as a citizen of Grande Prairie – you know, the drastic change just creates a huge amount of work for one particular individual. It's just, in my opinion, physically impossible.

Mr. Evans: Right. We've heard that message. Thank you for that. I have no other questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Allyson.

Ms Jeffs: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for coming this evening to speak with us. Mr. Frey, just a little feedback on the configuration that was proposed. We haven't had a lot of presenters today from actually the city of Grande Prairie. Most of what we've heard today has been from the county and some of the outlying communities. Even if this were for a future boundary commission looking at this issue again, I'm wondering if the proposal to have an urban riding and a rural riding around the city would have been more palatable if that riding had been able to have been a little smaller, if the population had worked and made that distance a little more manageable. Would that have been, you know, attractive at all?

Mr. Frey: No. In my opinion, I don't think it would be attractive because if you look at the geographic demographics, basically Grande Prairie, Wembley, Sexsmith – I don't know exact numbers, but I suspect that those three communities and around that area probably have about 60 to 70 per cent of the population of the two constituencies. So in order to meet the population and not skew the numbers, you pretty well have to take a major portion of Grande Prairie in both constituencies.

I don't see that changing because Sexsmith is growing. Wembley is growing. Grande Prairie is growing. You'll find that Valleyview and DeBolt and Beaverlodge are growing to a certain extent, but the growth tends to be in that Sexsmith-Wembley-Grande Prairie corridor. That's where the population is probably going to continue to grow. In order to divide the constituencies into two constituencies where one is urban and one is rural, I think even in the future it's going to be difficult. Many of the citizens are comfortable having an urban-rural mix because there are getting to be a lot of synergies between urban and rural now that never used to be in this area. There have been fights in the past, but they seem to have been mended.

Ms Jeffs: Well, certainly, the city of Grande Prairie, which had originally asked for a completely urban riding, has withdrawn that, and we're aware of that although we haven't had much feedback other than that today. We have been hearing more from the outlying communities. But I thank you for coming.

I have nothing further, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Frey: I think there is embarrassment from the city. They got hammered pretty good.

The Chair: Peter.

Mr. Dobbie: Thanks, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Frey. Your presentation and your answers have covered all the issues that I had, so thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.
Keith.

Dr. Archer: Yeah. Thanks, Mr. Frey, for the comments and the analysis. We've heard a number of presenters today talk about the large geographical size of this constituency, and your presentation, actually, uses fairly strong language to characterize what may result from this constituency. As I look at the constituencies in northern and northwestern Alberta, this proposed constituency strikes me as not entirely out of line with the size of constituencies in those areas where there is sparse population. Certainly, in the southwest corner, actually the sort of south-central and southwest corner, of this proposed constituency I don't see any indication of towns at all on the map that I have or the map that's on the screen. So while I appreciate the concern that may arise by increasing the geographical size of the constituency, I probably wouldn't overstate the challenges and the novelty of the size of this constituency in relation to other constituencies in the northern and northwestern parts of the province.

We certainly have received a consistent message over the hearings today and in our written feedback in favour of preserving the status quo. Certainly, we'll be taking that under advisement in our subsequent drafts. But, again, I did want to indicate that, so far as I can tell, the riding that we proposed in this round, while it may not be the riding that we propose in the final round, has characteristics that make it not inconsistent with some of the other ridings in this part of the province.

Mr. Frey: I'm aware of that, both for Grande Prairie-Smoky and as an individual citizen. I'm aware of the fact that sparsely populated areas end up having huge territories in a riding. My focus in this presentation was the distance from east to west. If you can do the comparison, like the Calgary-Edmonton corridor, basically, this constituency, Beaverlodge-Valleyview, would have a corridor from Demmitt to almost Fox Creek, but the bulk of the population is in the Sexsmith-Grande Prairie-Wembley area.

We don't know what's going to happen in the future, you know, populationwise, but for this situation it makes sense to have Grande Prairie divided in some fashion to split the population so that we end up with a riding that's a little bit smaller for the MLA and a little bit larger for the other MLA. If you look at Grande Prairie-Wapiti right now, basically, the MLA for Grande Prairie-Wapiti serves the south half of Grande Prairie and out to Demmitt and Beaverlodge and Wembley. You're right. That southwest corner really doesn't have a lot. You know, it's trees and hills and First Nations. Then the other constituency ends up having half the population north of Grande Prairie east. So what it does is that it cuts down the territory that an MLA has to cover and the number of communities that the MLA has to meet with.

That's another issue that isn't clear when you draw a picture of the map, that the MLA is expected to meet with chambers of commerce and the municipalities and the health authorities and the schools in all these areas. If you end up with 30 communities in a constituency, there are a lot more meetings that he has to attend than another community where there are only maybe five or six entities that you have to meet with. So it's a workload factor as well as a distance factor.

Dr. Archer: No further questions. Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you very much for your presentation. We'll certainly be taking it under advisement. Again, thanks for coming, and we appreciate that.

Ms Friesacher: The next presenter is Mayor Leona Hanson of Beaverlodge.

The Chair: Ms Hanson, since we're on *Hansard*, would you give your name for the record and who you are representing.

Ms Hanson: My name is Leona Hanson. I'm the mayor for the town of Beaverlodge, so representing the town of Beaverlodge today.

The Chair: Thank you. We'd love to hear from you.

**Leona Hanson, Mayor
Town of Beaverlodge**

Ms Hanson: Well, thank you very much for the opportunity today. I would like to begin by thanking you, the Electoral Boundaries Commission, for the opportunity to make this presentation today. Again, I am representing the town of Beaverlodge and the community that I represent in the west end of the county of Grande Prairie.

6:10

The town of Beaverlodge is very dissatisfied with the proposed changes to the electoral boundary for the Grande Prairie-Wapiti constituency. The current model is very functional, and there does not appear to be adequate reason to change the boundaries at this time. The current model has our MLA representing both urban and rural ridings. The rationale being made is that by removing the rural constituents from the riding and creating a new riding for just Grande Prairie, the voters will be better represented.

In our opinion, this is faulty logic. Currently the city of Grande Prairie has two MLAs to represent their needs in the Legislative Assembly. Under the new system the city would virtually have one representative, and the rural areas would have one representative. The issue for the rural riding is that the MLA would have a huge area to cover and would have limited time to meet with constituents. The other issue is that by having such a large riding with many smaller communities, it will be difficult for the MLA to have detailed information on each of the communities in their riding.

Currently, by splitting the large rural area in half, the MLAs are better able to communicate with their constituents and be more knowledgeable on the issues and goals of each of the communities served. With the proposed change there would be more communities in the riding, resulting in decreased time available to meet with the MLA. The limited availability caused by the increased number of communities served and the large distance required to travel would result in an unacceptable level of serviceability. No longer is it a matter of a 104-kilometre drive from one end of the riding to the other, but now it would be a distance of 290 kilometres, nearly three times as far as before. In addition, the increased geographic burden does not fall within a reasonable block of land mass but is severely chopped up, resulting in an erratic distribution of the population served, very unmanageable and ineffective, to say the least.

This region has worked very hard on creating partnerships and intermunicipal relationships. Many of the issues facing the city of Grande Prairie are the same issues facing the smaller urban municipalities like Beaverlodge, which is outside of Grande Prairie. By working together to resolve these issues, we have become a much stronger region. The changes to the electoral boundaries will begin to place borders between the partner municipalities that were not there before. The politics are that there is give-and-take and co-operation between the municipalities in the ridings to work for what is best for the region, and that subsequently results in a positive effect for all of our communities.

By separating the city of Grande Prairie from the rest of the municipalities, there is a real concern that the exemplary level of co-operation built up to date will begin to slip away. In addition, at the southern end of the riding is Fox Creek, a community that has direct municipal ties to the municipal district of Greenview. It would now be in a separate riding and would be removed from its natural flow of servicing.

The fact is that the current boundaries work very well. There is a good balance between urban and rural residents, and the interests are well represented. The current travel requirements are split between two MLAs. Changes would require the MLA serving the large, split-up geographic area to travel extensively while the other, city-based MLA would virtually have no travel within their riding. The many inequities created by this undoubtedly create a number of concerns as noted and jeopardize the solidified regional co-operation that exists and helps to strengthen all the communities in this area. When MLAs do not have to spend all of their time travelling around the riding, they can spend more time connecting with residents and spending time in the riding. By increasing the boundaries for one MLA with increased travel time, the amount of time left to connect with residents is reduced, as mentioned. Also, by adding more smaller urban municipalities, the issues become more diluted amongst a larger number of communities.

With the current electoral boundaries, each of the MLAs has a smaller number of municipalities. This results in a larger amount of time that can be devoted to each community. Time can be spent communicating with elected officials in each community as well as getting to spend time with the various not-for-profit and service groups within the riding. This affords them the time needed to deal with the real issues and opportunities in our area and not with the immense scheduling problems that would be inevitable.

The additional risk here is polarization of the communities in the riding, depending on where the MLA is from. As the MLA is likely to spend more time in or near their home community based on travel issues, that portion of the riding will have increased access to the MLA while the communities from the other side of the riding will have reduced access.

Many of the responsibilities and expectations of our elected officials require spending time in the communities attending meetings, graduations, civic ceremonies, and other events that are important to the residents of the community and are an integral part of keeping informed. By adding more communities to the riding, it becomes much more difficult to get out to these activities, not only due to increased travel time but also due to conflicts in scheduling. The more communities in the riding, the more likely there will be conflicts in dates and times. As the ridings exist now, it is possible for the MLA to attend two or three events across the riding in one day. Under the proposed revision this becomes much more difficult as a minimum of three hours would be required to travel from one end of the riding to the other.

Overall, the opinion of the town of Beaverlodge is that the proposed changes to the electoral boundaries will have a negative impact on the constituents of the two ridings. On behalf of the town of Beaverlodge I strongly encourage the Electoral Boundaries Commission not to proceed with the recommended changes to the existing electoral boundaries and to effectively leave the boundaries for the Grande Prairie-Wapiti and Grande Prairie-Smoky ridings in their current geographic form.

Thank you for providing the time to meet with you today on this very important matter.

The Chair: Thank you.
Keith.

Dr. Archer: Yeah. Thanks, Mayor Hanson. Your submission is similar to others that we've heard today, and we've been through a number of these issues, so I have no further questions. Thanks for the presentation.

Mr. Dobbie: Again, thanks, Mayor Hanson. One question I have is whether there was a council resolution passed to support your position tonight. You're nodding yes?

Ms Hanson: Yes. We had detailed discussion at our council, and there was a motion made to present our case to you as the commission.

Mr. Dobbie: Was it the unanimous opinion of the council?

Ms Hanson: Yes, it was unanimous.

Mr. Dobbie: Thank you.

The Chair: Allyson.

Ms Jeffs: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you very much, Mayor Hanson, for coming. I don't have any questions. We have heard this message today, and I really appreciate your presentation today. It adds to the eloquence of what we have heard. Thank you for coming.

The Chair: Brian.

Mr. Evans: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I'll be redundant in saying thank you, Mayor Hanson, for your presentation. We certainly are aware that the city of Grande Prairie has rescinded its motion asking for a different configuration, and we've heard from a number of presenters who are in favour of the status quo and who have also made positive comments about keeping Fox Creek in the Grande Prairie-Smoky riding. We're listening to that. Thank you very much for being here.

Ms Hanson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mayor Hanson. We have gotten a strong message. Thank you for this. I can assure you we'll be listening.

Ms Hanson: Thank you very much for the time, and I appreciate your consideration.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now, we have one further presenter, Mr. Jim Friesen. He is to be here at what time?

Mrs. Sawchuk: At 7 o'clock.

The Chair: All right. We'll take a short adjournment. The commission will remain in the room, and when he gets here, we'll hear.

[The hearing adjourned from 6:18 p.m. to 7:06 p.m.]

Ms Friesacher: Our next presenter is Mr. Jim Friesen.

The Chair: Welcome, Mr. Friesen. For the record we'd ask that you give your name and if you're representing someone, who that is.

Mr. Friesen: Okay. My name is Jim Friesen, and I'm representing the Religious Society of Friends, Quakers, and just my neighbours and friends.

The Chair: All right. Go ahead and make your presentation, sir.

Jim and Loretta Friesen Private Citizens

Mr. Friesen: This is just basically a letter I sent to the commission earlier, a month or two ago, and I'm just going to follow the general principles of what that said. In regard to creating a new urban constituency for the city of Grande Prairie and the amalgamation of the two constituencies, Grande Prairie-Wapiti and Grande Prairie-Smoky, we will deal with our objections to the creation of the new urban constituency first. We feel that the interests of the citizens of Grande Prairie are better served in the current electoral division. We now have two MLAs that represent Grande Prairie. With the new division we have one that represents an urban constituency. I fail to see how that would better serve the citizens of Grande Prairie.

Second, the current electoral division provides two MLAs for the city of Grande Prairie and area. Under the new boundary we have one. Grande Prairie and the people living in Grande Prairie are still very much dependent upon the resources of forestry, agriculture, and oil that surround the city of Grande Prairie. Under the present division the MLA serves both the workplace of the citizen as well as his home area, where he lives. I mean, the citizens of Grande Prairie are far better served under the present situation. We feel that the MLA serving only the city of Grande Prairie is certainly isolated from the economic base of the city.

To deal with the Beaverlodge-Valleyview constituency, I think that what we would have is a vast, sprawling wilderness that no one MLA can properly serve. You've still got a city that's partly divided. Crystal Heights and north of 16th Street remains in a new constituency. Is the provincial government going to provide the MLA with more funding? Who's going to drive from the B.C. border to Valleyview if he has his office in Valleyview? Is a citizen from Grande Prairie going to drive to Valleyview or Beaverlodge to see his MLA? I think that's not going to work. He would need at least two constituency offices to serve such a vast area. And how is a smaller party or an independent going to campaign? I mean, he doesn't have the funding of a party that's in power or one of the richer parties. How could he even campaign in such a huge area? I think it would be totally discriminatory to one of the smaller parties or to an independent candidate.

The Chair: I can assist you there, sir. We have heard that message from many presenters today. It's quite clear that the city of Grande Prairie passed a resolution retracting their earlier position, which resulted in this one urban riding, and is now saying that they want to go back to the original boundaries, roughly as it was.

Mr. Friesen: Yeah, and I have been informed of the same thing.

The Chair: You're a resident of Grande Prairie?

Mr. Friesen: I'm a resident of Grovedale. It's just south of Grande Prairie. It would be in the Greenview municipality.

The Chair: There was a suggestion that there be a slight change in the boundary within the city. I wonder if we could show you that and get your comments.

Mr. Friesen: Sure.

The Chair: This is going back to two rural-urban type ridings.

Mr. Friesen: So the new proposal would be . . .

Mr. Dobbie: It's 100th Avenue that the suggestion is that it run along now. The change is that the current one tends to wind through town a little more. As someone who's familiar with the area, we're wondering what your impression of that is. If we had a straighter boundary through town if there were two constituencies, would that make sense to you?

Mr. Friesen: Yeah, that would make sense. I would have no problem with that. I would also have no problem if somehow some of the riding was moved into the Dunvegan-Central Peace area because that certainly is underrepresented. As long as what was proposed before is changed – I mean, that was just simply bizarre.

The Chair: Well, that was done to accommodate what the city council had asked for. It's no longer what the city council is asking for, and it is certainly not what the surrounding municipalities and others are asking for.

Do you see this boundary as outlined on that map as being all right?

Mr. Friesen: Yeah. I would have no trouble with that at all. I think that's reasonable.

The Chair: All right. Brian, have you any questions?

Mr. Evans: No, I don't, Mr. Chairman.

I do appreciate, Mr. Friesen, your coming in and providing us with your take on this. As the chairman has indicated, we've heard this from a number of other people today. Thank you.

Mr. Friesen: Thank you very much for allowing me.

The Chair: There may be other questions, Mr. Friesen.

Ms Jeffs: Mr. Friesen, thank you so much for coming in. I would just echo Brian Evans's and the chairman's comments. We have heard a very consistent message while we've been here today. We do appreciate your coming in.

I was locating where your community is on the map here. Grovedale is about how much distance outside of Grande Prairie?

Mrs. Friesen: Well, where we live is about a half-hour.

Ms Jeffs: About a half-hour away? Okay.

Mrs. Friesen: It depends on how fast you drive.

Mr. Friesen: It's a remote corner of Greenview municipality. It's cut off by the forestry reserve, so it's kind of a wedge against Grande Prairie county and Greenview municipality.

Ms Jeffs: Thank you. Thank you both for coming in.

7:15

The Chair: Peter.

Mr. Dobbie: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Friesen. It's great to have your comments on the record. The only thing I would say is that I appreciate your thought that looking to balance the constituencies is a good idea. The challenge, of course, is that if we start to take any population away from here, we are breaking up those natural relationships. We're doing our best, and we've heard you loud and clear.

Dr. Archer: Thanks, Mr. Friesen. I have no further questions.

The Chair: Well, Mr. Friesen, thank you, and thank you, Mrs. Friesen. We'll certainly be taking this into account. We've received a very clear message.

Mr. Friesen: Thank you for allowing us.

The Chair: Thank you.

Melanie, are there other presenters?

There being no further presenters, we will adjourn. Thank you all for coming.

[The hearing adjourned at 7:16 p.m.]

