

BC Election 2024

Questions for the Parties on Issues of Concern for BC's Rural-Remote-Indigenous Coastal Communities

The Rural Islands Economic Partnership (“RIEP”) founded in 2020 is a grassroots organization representing about 45,000+ BC residents across 18 rural islands – Bowen, Broughton Archipelago, Cormorant, Cortes, Denman, Gabriola, Galiano, Gambier, Hornby, Lasqueti, Malcolm, Mayne, Pender, Quadra, Salt Spring, Saturna, Texada, Thetis – together with rural remote coastal communities, and Indigenous Communities, who have ancestral, traditional, unceded and treaty territories or reserve lands on these lands.

RIEP is recognized for its work supporting rural islands and rural-remote-Indigenous coastal economies, and for facilitating connections with island settlers and Indigenous communities across the Province towards achieving long-term socio-economic well-being.

Rural-remote-Indigenous coastal communities have different challenges than mainland communities. These challenges include: greater supply-chain disruptions, ferry transportation constraints and limited health-care resources. These challenges contribute to the economic and social hardship facing the majority of small businesses, artisans, farms, and non-profits serving these communities.

RIEP requests your responses, by Monday, September 30th, to the questions following this letter on issues of importance to BC's rural-remote-Indigenous coastal communities.

Responses to these questions will be published widely on social media and local publications in advance of the election to help residents of these communities make informed voting decisions.

Please see the Background Section on page #3 for further information about the questionnaire topics.

With advance appreciation for your attention to addressing vital issues facing BC's rural islands and rural-remote Indigenous coastal communities.

Respectfully,

Francine Z. Carlin, President & Chair
cc: RIEP Board of Directors

QUESTIONS:

1. Community Economic Development

Funding programs such as the Rural Economic Diversification & Infrastructure Program which stimulate rural development have had a strong uptake by our communities in recent years, indicating the need for support in this area. **How will your party support our communities in the areas of economic resilience, diversification, clean growth and infrastructure development?**

The Island Coastal Economic Trust is the only economic trust serving our communities of BC. **Will your party recapitalize the Island Coastal Economic Trust - the sole economic trust serving the island-coastal region - with at least \$150 million and transform it as a permanent regenerative fund?**

Our communities are dependent on tourism dollars for their local economies, however there is a need for more regenerative tourism to preserve island culture, island carrying capacities and natural beauty. **How will your party support our communities in their efforts to create tourism as a "force for good" that supports communities?**

2. Affordable Housing

Availability of affordable, place-appropriate housing, either owned or rented, is one of the biggest challenges facing our communities in BC. **What will your party do to address the housing crisis in our communities in the short and long term?**

Health Authority regulation has become a significant barrier to progress on the housing file as it blocks innovative solutions to sewage treatment, water collection and purification in our communities. **How will your party help advance these innovations appropriate to our communities that enable greater housing availability?**

3. Emergency Planning and Response

Our communities are extremely vulnerable to the disruptions caused by natural disasters, regardless of their location. **Please give specific examples on how your party will assist our communities in being fully prepared for these disruptions, including evacuations, business closures, lost productivity, and specific impacts, particularly to the vulnerable and marginalized?**

4. Healthcare

Our communities struggle to provide adequate healthcare for its populations with so many deficits in infrastructure, staff and other challenges. **How will your party address the deficits in health care provision in our communities?**

5. BC Ferries

BC Ferries has undertaken several engagement sessions recently with the our communities, generating policy recommendations crucial for improving the service. **What specific actions will your party undertake to improve the sustainability and resilience of ferry services on the BC coast?**

6. Passenger Transportation

The current lack of affordable, convenient, frequent and reliable passenger transportation in our communities results in reduced economic development. **How will your party support our communities' pursuit of reliable, affordable and convenient passenger transportation services, both in and between communities?**

7. Support for Renewable Energy

Communities are facing increasing risks from climate change; phasing out fossil fuels & support for renewables is urgent. **Will your party stop approvals of new fossil fuels projects in our province, phase out existing ones, and begin rapid support for renewables?**

8. Food Security

With increasing land costs and other challenges, agricultural and local food production and processing businesses are struggling in our communities. **How will your party work to improve food security and local food production?**

9. Governance

Vibrant and intact communities require an element of political representation. Many island community voices are lost at the Regional District table where the vast majority of the representatives come from and are focused on urban needs. **How will your party work to ensure the voices of our communities are heard at the Regional District level?**

10. Volunteer Sector

Our communities are dependent on volunteers to help provide the kind of essential services that communities with municipal governments often take for granted. **How will your party recognize and support the volunteer and non-profit sector of our communities?**

11. K-12 Education

Many of our communities do not have access to the full range of public education, and must relocate entirely to other areas in order to access educational services for our children. The "rural-urban" gap where residents from rural areas show significantly lower skills proficiencies is well-documented in Canada. **How will your party address the rural-urban education gap for our communities?**

QUESTIONNAIRE BACKGROUND:

Community Economic Development

As [recommended by the BC Rural Centre](#), there is a need for government support in rural investment and business & entrepreneurial development. This is evidenced by the strong uptake by our communities of programs including the [Rural Economic Diversification and Infrastructure Program \(REDIP\)](#) and the [BC Manufacturing Jobs Fund](#).

These programs promote:

- Economic diversification
- Resilience
- Clean growth opportunities
- Infrastructure development

Through [ICET](#)'s investment in communities of our regions, many gaps have been addressed in local economic infrastructure, economic capacity building programs, and economic recovery programs that support the well-being of communities. Local ICET investments have resulted in new jobs, business retention, year-round revenues for local businesses and a more resilient local economy.

With respect to tourism, [RIEP has demonstrated](#) that it supports our communities in their pursuit of regenerative tourism, or tourism “as a force for good.” RIEP has promoted best practices for realizing responsible, respectful, conservation-focused, climate-aware tourism.

Affordable Housing

Our communities are often overlooked when it comes to the housing crisis, yet the availability of affordable, place-appropriate housing, either owned or rented, is one of the biggest challenges facing our communities in BC.

Working individuals and families in our communities face lower wages than their urban counterparts, and cannot break into the real estate market; rentals are difficult to find or not affordable given the lower local wages in these areas.

Any housing strategy must support and work in partnership with our communities to deliver affordable housing that meets long-term housing needs. The BC Government [has been called on](#) by the Union of BC Municipalities to provide funding and support to local governments to facilitate affordable housing projects in rural areas of BC.

Emergency Planning & Response

During the COVID pandemic and natural disasters such as the Coquihalla highway atmospheric river disaster, supply chains were seriously disrupted. Our communities are extremely vulnerable to supply chain disruptions which lead to product shortages and shipping delays, affecting availability of food and medical access.

Reflecting on the staggering fiscal and human impacts of natural disasters (the BC 2021 heat dome, wildfires, floods and landslides damage costs [reported](#) to be between \$10.6 billion and \$17.1 billion) it becomes clear that we need urgent, transformational change in how we approach emergencies and how we respond to ongoing and future loss and damage.

Healthcare

The provision of adequate health care in our communities presents many unique challenges. These include vast distances, lack of transportation infrastructure, staffing shortages, scattered populations, poor access to communication infrastructure, and many socio-economic conditions that can impact health and well-being.

To improve healthcare access and outcomes, solutions must involve a multi-faceted approach which include adequate funding, evidence-backed policy and community-driven solutions, as advocated by the [BC Rural Health Network](#).

BC Ferries

During the [Charting Our Course Engagement Sessions](#) undertaken by BC Ferries in 2023 and 2024, participant feedback generated some common themes were generated around policy areas crucial for the future sustainability and resilience of ferry services, including

- Preference for improving service frequency and reliability, emphasizing the importance of minimizing wait times, especially for passengers commuting to work and medical appointments.
- Support for prioritizing environmentally sustainable transportation options, such as foot passengers and cyclists, and considering route-specific flexibility to cater to the unique demands of different communities.
- Suggestions for exploring dynamic pricing to help manage demand, and expanding the reservation system to enhance travel planning and certainty.
- Desire to see increased integration of ferry services with local transit

Passenger Transportation

Transportation in rural BC is an important economic and social issue. With the lack of affordable, convenient, frequent and reliable options for travel in and between many of our communities, many residents say that as a result, employment opportunities are severely curtailed. This results in reduced economic development in their communities ([Why Rural Canadians Need Public Transit Just as Urgently as Suburbanites, 2023](#)).

With the BC government spending less than \$5 on interregional bus services connecting communities, compared with about \$1,000 annually per capita on roads, \$215 to subsidize urban transit, plus about \$50 on sidewalks and bikeways ([Business Case for Improving Inter-regional Bus Services, 2024](#)), communities are looking to solutions to help address this serious passenger transportation deficit.

Renewable Energy & GHG Emission Reduction

Our communities need strong government and industry leaders who keep the climate crisis foremost in mind and set a strong example for the public and industry to follow.

[Clean energy projects](#) are an important part of the future of British Columbia. BC has abundant clean energy resources, and they are fundamental to our future prosperity and sustainability as a society. The renewable energy mix includes many proven technologies such as small (run-of-river) hydro, wind, solar, natural gas, biomass, and biogas, and emerging technologies such as geothermal, ocean/tidal, and biofuels.

Effective climate action will build resilience to a changing climate, while continuing to reduce emissions. Taking action will require working together across industry sectors and professions and collaboration with First Nations, businesses, the public, and other organizations. The [BC Climate Action Toolkit](#) provides tools to help governments demonstrate leadership and progress in reducing emissions from both corporate operations and the broader community.

Food Security

With increasing land costs and other challenges, agricultural and local food production and processing businesses are struggling in our communities. Community food security is obtained when all community members have a “[safe, personally acceptable, nutritious diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes healthy choices, community self-reliance and equal access for everyone](#),” and yet almost 12% of households in rural BC are food insecure. For Indigenous communities that number is even higher ranging from 48% to 55% in Coastal and Vancouver Island and Interior First Nations communities respectively ([United Way](#)).

A more resilient food system is needed, bringing food production and processing home to reduce reliance on long-distance food sources. B.C.'s [food processing industry is small](#) compared with historic trends or comparable regions. The BC Government [can help communities](#) build a stronger local food system, through local strategic planning and policy development, land use planning and infrastructure development.

Governance

Communities in BC's rural-remote-Indigenous coastal areas are governed by Regional Districts rather than municipalities. The Regional Districts mainly provide bureaucratic and accounting services shared by a group of communities, with staff handling distribution of tax revenues, overseeing enactment of bylaws, and ensuring compliance of laws and regulations.

Communities in each Regional District can be quite dissimilar from each other, for example, remote mountain towns have little in common with remote islands, and small rural communities have little in common with growing cities and suburbs. Unfortunately, many of our communities' voices are lost at the Regional District table where the vast majority of the representatives come from and are focused on urban needs. The [Regional District structure does not adequately support democratic decision-making](#) for these smaller communities – especially for the Islands as all but Bowen have electoral areas which are the 'poor relatives' of the regional districts.

As for those islands governed by the Island Trust, this additional governance factor creates overlapping jurisdictions with the Regional Districts that can be confusing and complicated to navigate. The Islands Trust is responsible for land use planning and regulation (OCPs, zoning bylaws, and development permits), while Regional Districts are responsible for building permits. Local parks and recreation commissions are appointed by, and report to, Regional Districts.

Volunteer Sector

Many of the essential, ecological, and social services available in our communities are provided through the social profit sector, operated overwhelmingly by volunteers. The [BC Rural Centre](#) rightly states, “Volunteering in rural communities is not just an act of charity; it is often the lifeblood that sustains the heartbeat of these remote, less populated regions. In areas where resources may be limited, the willingness of individuals to give their time and skills can bridge gaps and create a level of support that binds the community together.” And yet, these non-profits operate on a shoe-string budget and struggle to provide these essential services to their communities.

K to 12 Education

There exists a rural-urban education gap in Canada today, which has become a crisis in some B.C.’s our communities. According to the [Canada Council on Learning](#): “Canadians should be particularly concerned because, among OECD countries, Canada has the worst rural-urban gap with respect to levels of education in the workforce.” These rural-urban differences persist across all provinces, with rural students dropping out of high-school at nearly twice the rate of their urban counterparts and consistently under-performing in all areas of achievement: reading, math, and science.

The lack of a high school in some of our rural-remote-Indigenous communities has created a crisis as year-after-year families in their primary working years leave the island, many to never return, or as learners found they had to choose between foregoing secondary education or leaving their home communities and cultures to seek boarding and schooling elsewhere. At a cost of more than \$1000/mo for housing in Campbell River for example, this proves financially inaccessible for many families in our communities who earn on average half of the BC average median family income.

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