

## **BERRY CREEK REPORT AND LONGMAN'S CALL FOR RE-ESTABLISHED LOCAL GOV'T**

*Part four of a series about Oliver Longman and the history of the Special Areas.*

Oliver Longman, architect and father of what became the Special Areas, was uniquely equipped to serve our region. He was a farm kid. He was educated. He'd taught agriculture at Claresholm and Olds. He'd served as principal at the Agricultural School in Raymond. He'd studied irrigation in southern Alberta, and carefully looked into the impact of long-term drought.

In the early thirties, Longman wrote a report called the Berry Creek Report. Many of its ideas were later incorporated into the Special Areas Act.

In his excellent book, *A Land Reclaimed*, Jack Gorman says that by April of 1932, Longman had studied and reviewed territory comprising 72 full townships representing more than 2 million acres. At the time, Longman deliberately followed municipal boundaries as closely as possible because he thought it would better "facilitate the adjustment procedures" within the impoverished region.

Severe droughts along with the lowest prices for farm products in Canadian history, had decimated the region. Lacking the irrigation initiatives being established in the south, farmers in our region abandoned their hopes of independence. Many fled. Dozens of local municipalities were overwhelmed by unpaid taxes and mounting debt.

Originally, Longman never anticipated that existing municipal governments would be affected by his rehabilitation efforts, although he did anticipate that some: "would revert back to LIDs [Local Improvement Districts] because... the government [would then] assume some of the overhead costs that the municipalities had to bear."

At no time did Longman view locally elected municipal government as the problem, or even as a contributor to the problem. Instead, these early municipalities were victims of drought, severely

depressed commodity prices, and a failed federal government policy that tried to put a homestead on just about every quarter section.

Longman wrote: "To bring about an adequate and rapid adjustment of affairs... it is essential that a single duly constituted authority have power to deal with all manner of problems common to the area. This suggestion is not intended to infer that any municipal... district should be forced to accept."

Decades later, Longman was still upset that the Minister of Agriculture in those early years never took "significant interest" in the region's problems.

Politically, it was decided (by the provincial government) that the way to get through the economic crisis was to eliminate local municipal governments. Even so, as soon as the region was on the road to recovery, by the 1950s, Longman and others pointedly called for locally elected municipal government to be re-established in the region.

About fifteen years after the Special Areas Act had been passed, Longman chaired the first of two provincial commissions that studied the Special Areas and its future. Both commissions recommended that locally elected municipal government be re-established.

Longman recognized that at no time had there been a failure of local governments in the Special Areas region. Instead, there had been a one-time crisis affecting the entire Great Plains of North America from prairie Canada to the Texas panhandle.

In the region that became the Special Areas, these problems were eventually compounded by the lack of a realistic long-term plan directed toward expanded economic development, and by the genuine limitations associated with the lack of locally-elected and locally-controlled government.

*This commentary is produced by the editorial committee of the Hard Grass Landowners Council whose members include: Richard Bailey, Pat Rutledge, Mark Doolaege, and Jim Ness.*