

Historians lament rejection of heritage bylaw

Hopes dimmed in bid to preserve history, assist tourism ahead of 2017 Alaska Highway celebrations

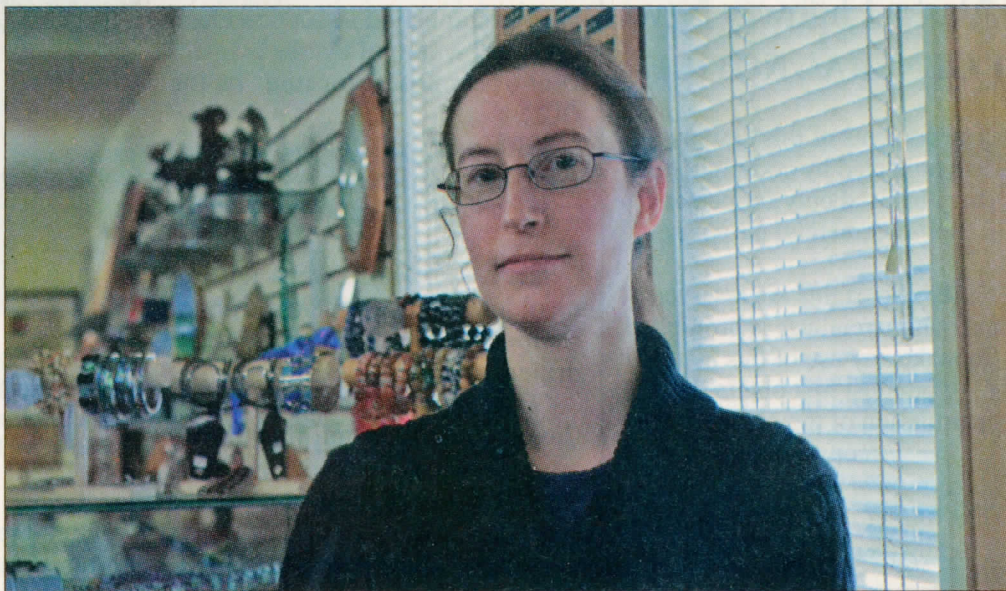
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PEACE REGION — Local historians say they're frustrated with the Peace River Regional District's decision to toss aside a heritage bylaw that would have seen new protections for historic sites in Northeast B.C.

The board opted not to revive the proposed bylaw at its Feb. 11 meeting, citing uncertainty in the local economy.

Heather Sjoblom, curator of the Fort St. John North Peace Museum, asked the regional board to have another look at heritage protections, which failed to pass several years ago.

She said the regional district missed an opportunity to diversify the local economy.



BRONWYN SCOTT PHOTO

Fort St. John North Peace Museum Curator Heather Sjoblom says heritage preservation plays a role in tourism and the upcoming Alaska Highway celebrations in 2017.

"Heritage, arts and culture are often what is cut first in times of economic crisis," said Sjoblom.

"But with 2017 being the 150th anniversary of Canada as well as the 75th anniversary of the Alaska Highway, it's maybe time to diversify our economy a little

into tourism, and heritage preservation can play a role in that."

Anne Haycock of the South Peace Historical Society, echoed Sjoblom's disappointment.

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"We really did count on the regional district," Haycock said.

The failure of the bylaw is another blow to the South Peace Historical Society, which had a funding request for a full-time archivist turned down by the City of Dawson Creek earlier this year.

"All of these things are not insurmountable," she said. "It's just that, coming at this time when we want to concentrate on 2017, it's a real pain. We're struggling because it's so important. If you don't know where you came from, you don't know where you're going."

The PRRD considered consulting with local historical societies and municipalities to find out how it could create a function to preserve historical buildings and sites in the region.

The price tag for this was estimated at \$10,000. The board backed away from the proposal because it would need to recoup that money by raising taxes.

"It would have been nice to at least start a process (and a) conversation about what form this bylaw would take," Sjoblom said.

Haycock found it odd the regional district didn't involve historical societies in the process earlier.

"They didn't ask us for help," she said. "We could have helped them (with consultation), but they didn't ask. I think it's very backward thinking of them to not even help out in a little way. They wouldn't have had to do much, because our organizations are here with the knowledge and (we're) ready to help."

For now, the historical societies say they will do what they can to preserve the region's history without new financial support from local governments.

Haycock said her organization is working to create a new regional historical society that would represent museums in all seven Peace Region communities, as well as area First Nations and even residents with their own historical collections.

"We need to do something to keep our heritage here because none of the other groups want to do this," Haycock said. "We're going to keep hammering away because we have to... we're disappointed but we're looking at other alternatives."

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