

Water Improvement Districts Briefing – May 16, 2025

Topic:

Access to Clean Drinking Water & Funding Equity for Water Improvement Districts

Key Message:

Clean drinking water is a human right. Improvement districts (IDs), which serve a large portion of rural British Columbia, face growing infrastructure challenges without equitable access to funding. This meeting gathered voices from multiple districts to advocate for policy change, grant access, and infrastructure support. Including: Brew Bay Improvement District, Gillies Bay Improvement District, Hopkins Landing Waterworks District, Lund Waterworks District, Pine Tree Place Improvement District, Savary Shores Improvement District, Stillwater Improvement District, Van Anda Improvement District, Vaucroft Improvement District, Woodlynn Improvement District

1. Context and Common Themes

- **Aging Infrastructure:** Many water systems are 50–60+ years old and require immediate replacement or upgrades.
 - **Funding Disparity:** IDs cannot currently access the same provincial and federal grants available to municipalities.
 - **Catch-22 Situations:** Many regional districts (RDs) will not absorb improvement districts unless infrastructure is upgraded first, which the districts cannot afford without funding access.
 - **Volunteer-Run Systems:** Many IDs rely on volunteer boards and lack technical and administrative capacity.
 - **One-Size-Does-Not-Fit-All:** Provincial policy toward eliminating IDs does not consider local realities; small rural communities often function best with localized, tailored systems.
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2. District Updates & Concerns

Brew Bay

- Administrative issues; limited support from RD.
- System functioning well, but funding remains a challenge.

Van Anda

- Infrastructure in severe decline; recent leaks losing 50% of water.
- Need for policy change to access grants.

Gillies Bay

- Provincial goal to eliminate IDs is impractical.

- 200+ IDs remain; they serve vital functions and cannot be treated uniformly.
- Small communities are being discriminated against in funding.

Pine Tree

- 60-year-old lines, new tanks needed.
- Issues with multiple trailers on single-family lots.

Stillwater

- Cost of upgrade quadrupled tolls; unaffordable for residents.
- Access route through private land and under BC Hydro lines adds significant cost.

Savary Shores

- Denied tank replacement funding despite outdated infrastructure.
- Asset management plan from 2008 is outdated.

Lund

- Systems function well but lack capital for improvements.
- Multiple systemic issues including permitting and access timelines.

Savary Island SSID

- \$2.5M needed for tank replacement or repair.
- Only 214 lots; limited tax base.

Texada Districts

- Fire hydrants and leak detection surveys are ongoing.
- Emphasis on cooperation between districts.

3. Policy & Administrative Challenges

- **Lack of Grant Access:** IDs are excluded from critical infrastructure funding programs.
- **Regulatory Burden:** Application processes for licenses, surveys, and permits are backlogged and unclear.
- **Volunteer Burnout:** Writing grant applications and navigating bureaucracy is time-consuming and discouraging.
- **Asset Management:** Many IDs have outdated or no formal asset management plans due to capacity issues.

- **Rates & Affordability:** Merging with RDs can dramatically increase water rates for small systems.
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4. Proposed Actions

1. Policy Reform:

- Enable improvement districts to apply directly for provincial and federal infrastructure grants.
- Develop exceptions or transition supports for IDs merging into regional systems.

2. Capacity Support:

- Fund certified small water operators with stipends or shared roving models.
- Provide technical and administrative support for volunteer-run boards.

3. Data Collection & Coordination:

- Compile and share information province-wide on aging infrastructure and capital needs.
- Coordinate provincial ministries to address permitting, funding, and regulation gaps.

4. Recognition of Diversity:

- Recognize and support functioning improvement districts as resilient, low-cost systems.
 - Tailor solutions based on system size and community capacity.
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5. Closing Comments & Action Items

- **Health** has publicly supported water as a human right, but also implied IDs must fold into RDs — a stance IDs challenge.
 - **Legislative Support:** follow up with Ministry of Housing & Municipal Affairs on opening grant access to include IDs.
 - **Next Steps:** Attendees encouraged to submit a **short, written summary of their district's needs** to be compiled and sent to the Ministry of Housing and Municipal Affairs.
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Conclusion:

There is broad consensus that current policies create significant barriers for improvement districts, making it difficult for rural communities to maintain access to safe, clean drinking water. Continued

advocacy and a coordinated approach to grant reform, capacity-building, and infrastructure investment are critical.