

Robert Bailey



It Pays to Protect Our History

Every community has its history, and some BC communities, with foresight and courage, have carefully nurtured the legitimate legacy of their heritage. Others have not been as aggressive in protecting this legacy, nor as keen on tapping into its dormant economic power.

The impact of heritage projects on the local economy of communities

One might question the relevance or economic viability of “heritage conservation.” Is it a stagnant and dusty memoir from a by-gone era or does it have an important part in today’s economy? Today, “heritage conservation” is a growth industry. A 1994 province-wide survey reported that 230 heritage attractions drew 8 million visitors, employed 2,700 full- and part-time employees, and operated with a combined budget of \$77 million.

The spin-off benefits are even larger. Downtown Heritage Revitalization Areas prove their economic benefit is huge. Rehabilitation projects infuse capital into the local economy, are labour intensive, foster trade skill training, and increase employment opportunities. They create new service sector revenues that have proven to equal capital cost outlays in three to seven years.

Consider Fort Langley. Its museums, fur trade fort, and collection of older buildings are the cornerstone for a relatively small designated “heritage conservation area” that generates \$20 million annually in direct revenues to local

business. Without the preservation focus on its heritage resources, neither the business climate nor a sense of community would be developed. The economic value of restored historic buildings is substantial; the bottom line is: retail business picks up; rents are higher; vacancy is lowered; and the municipal tax base increases.

Not all heritage conservation is a walk in the park.

Heritage conservation vs. private land rights

Not all heritage conservation is a walk in the park. It is possible for a landowner to find material of historical value that negatively impacts his property. Imagine a farmer discovering bones, broken pottery, and other remains buried in a pasture. These artefacts may generate public interest but there is no conclusive evidence to their origin. Understand the farmer’s shock when he is told that this may be a possible heritage site and that it is his responsibility to prove whether or not this is, indeed, the case. In other words, the landowner must bear the burden and financial strain of establishing whether a historical heritage issue is at stake here and until the issue is resolved, his use of the land is to be limited, if not outrightly curtailed. In one case, the cost to establish the *bona fides* of the potential heritage site was in the order of \$20,000, to be borne

solely by the farmer. In the meantime, if the owner proceeded with his commercial enterprise and destroyed the site, he faced penalties of up to \$100,000.

While BC has become a leader in heritage revitalization with innovative legislation designed to give communities a sense of place and duration—of providing something that is authentic—some issues remain with regard to identifying and implementing heritage conservation. For example, despite community and provincial heritage registers, there is no central registry, such as the Land Titles Office, that identifies sites of historical interest. If heritage is important to all, should the cost fall solely on the individual property owner? Sound planning and pro-active heritage policies and practices can work for everyone—the property owner, the community, the past, and the future. What is required is the vision to understand the ongoing value of heritage conservation, the will to protect this resource, and the wisdom to deal equitably with all the stakeholders. ▲

Licensed in 1973, **Robert Bailey**, R.I.(B.C.), joined the REIBC in 1977. Since that time, he has lived and worked in Surrey and Langley. He is currently involved with residential development in the Fraser Valley.

BC Heritage Website:
<http://www.heritage.gov.bc.ca/index.htm>