

The Legacy of the Kelowna Board of Trade & Chamber of Commerce

Introduction

Many versions of Kelowna's story exist, but none are told through the eyes of the Kelowna Board of Trade. 120 years ago, Kelowna was marked by isolation. It wasn't until a few of Kelowna's ambitious business leaders came together to form the Kelowna Board of Trade that change began to unfold. Over the next century, the organization would help foster Kelowna's economic development, advocating for infrastructure, and helping the city become the global destination it is today.

Established in 1906, the Kelowna Board of Trade initially began to promote the agricultural value of the Kelowna area. Led by its inaugural Board President, Daniel Wilbur Sutherland, the organization got to work paving the way for businesses in Kelowna.



But what is a Board of Trade or Chamber of Commerce? And how are the two related? In the present day, a Board of Trade and Chamber of Commerce are essentially the same but differ in their legal structure. Both are membership-driven organizations for businesses in a given geographical area that advocate for pro-business policies, offer networking, and promote economic development. Before 1961, the Kelowna Chamber of Commerce was known as the Kelowna Board of Trade. However, after applying for a name change from the federal government, in January of 1961, the Kelowna Board of Trade became the Kelowna Chamber of Commerce.¹

To avoid confusion, we will use the name "Kelowna Board of Trade" to reference all events prior to 1961, and we will use the name "Kelowna Chamber of Commerce" to reference all events thereafter.

Becoming The Board of Trade

When Kelowna was first incorporated in 1905, it held little importance in the Okanagan Valley. Penticton was the connection to the Lower Mainland, and Vernon was the business centre of the Okanagan. Therefore, it was common for travelers to skip Kelowna entirely on their passages north and south of Okanagan Lake. The local economy depended almost entirely on fruit growing, and much of the population consisted of immigrants from British colonial roots drawn by the promise of land and opportunity.

Despite this potential, Kelowna was detached from the region. Penticton and Vernon had rail access, which improved their ability to attract residents and maintain a healthy economy. Conversely, Kelowna relied largely on Okanagan Lake to ship and receive goods. This lack of access put a damper on Kelowna's economy.

On June 6, 1906, a group of Kelowna men, frustrated with being overlooked, came together to promote the area's agricultural potential.² However, it didn't take long for the organization's efforts to expand into lobbying for better physical, social, and economic infrastructure. For example, in 1913, the Kelowna Board of Trade lobbied for a larger post office facility to accommodate the growing population, and in 1914 The Board's Telephone Committee finally established continuous service in the city.³ Not long after, in 1915, The Board urged the provincial government to ensure reliable irrigation for the Okanagan Valley, warning that uninterrupted water was vital for agriculture and the local economy.⁴ The Board fought hard in these early years to ensure that Kelowna had a voice provincially and federally.

Even in the face of some of the world's most grueling times, The Board continued to speak up. At the outbreak of World War I, the Kelowna Board of Trade dropped everything to ensure that the Canadian military had what they needed. This came in the form of horses, surplus fruits and vegetables, and supporting policies related to the adoption of daylight savings time.⁵ At the end of the war, The Board worked with veterans on soldier settlement and employment in the region to support their return to civilian life.⁶

As business started to pick up in the post-war economy, efforts intensified to promote Kelowna as an attractive place to live and conduct business. Returning to their mission statement, The Board worked to promote local produce, going so far as to use its own office windows to display fruit as a form of advertisement. At the same time, it recognized the need for greater coordination within the industry. In response, The Board helped establish a Fruit Shippers' Association, helping to stabilize prices, organize marketing efforts, and manage both domestic and export sales.⁷

They also addressed transportation and market access by advocating for fair railway freight rates, challenging policies such as those stemming from the Crow's Nest Pass Agreement, which placed Okanagan producers at a disadvantage when shipping goods to Prairie markets.⁸

Simultaneously, this period saw The Board expand its efforts to promote Kelowna beyond the region. The organization invested in signage at major travel points such as ferry landings and international borders and worked with associations like the Oroville Commercial Club to market the Okanagan as a destination in British Columbia and Washington State.⁹ These initiatives marked an early change in favour of tourism as a complementary economic driver alongside agriculture.

Locally, The Board remained involved in civic development. It supported the creation of a local radio station as a new form of communication and promotion, and secured a late ferry service on Thursdays, Saturdays and public holidays for the benefit of residents and travelers.¹⁰ These efforts provided an understanding of what was needed for Kelowna to grow.

World War II & Colonial Kelowna

After struggling through the depression, Kelowna found purpose again with the start of World War II. Drawing on its experience from the First World War, the Kelowna Board of Trade once again stepped forward in support of the national effort. Much like in WWI, The Board started by offering supplies in the form of excess agricultural products.¹¹ It soon expanded its contributions, encouraging locals to buy War Savings Certificates and lobbying to set up military camps in Kelowna in addition to the ones in Vernon and Penticton.¹² Moreover, The Board obtained data on men available for enlistment during the Valley's agricultural off-season.¹³

Yet, alongside these actions, the war also exposed deeper social tensions within the community. Following the events of Pearl Harbour and the escalation of the Pacific War, attitudes toward Japanese Canadians hardened. As a result, The Board of Trade adopted positions that reflected the widespread fear and prejudice at the time. During this point in the war, Kelowna was experiencing a severe labour shortage, with many of the men away in military training camps or overseas.¹⁴ As a result, The Board saw fit to use the Japanese people for labour, supporting 1943 agreements that allowed their work on farms, with conditions around permits and restrictions on movement and residency.¹⁵ In 1944, The Board formally endorsed several policies advocating for repatriation to Japan or forced redistribution across Canada.¹⁶ This also came with controls on settlement and future immigration.¹⁷ Amid wartime hysteria, The Board was also opposed to refugee settlement fearing unrestricted immigration.¹⁸

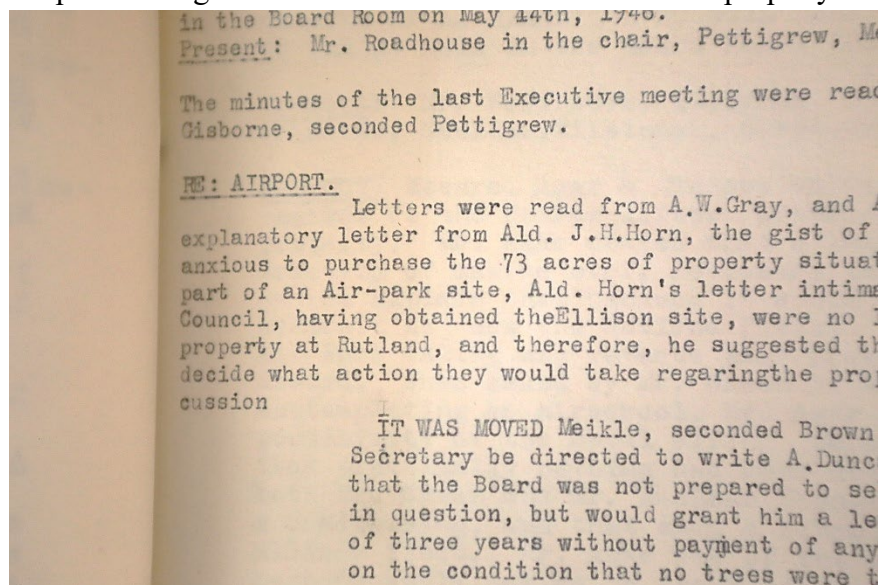
It's important to recognize that as a predominantly white, colonial town, Kelowna reflected a narrow social group, deliberately shaped as a British settler society. Thus, The Board's identity reflected these values, and there was little internal opposition to discriminatory policy. It would be decades before The Board included women and non-white directors in its leadership.

Kelowna Takes Flight

When the turmoil of the Second World War subsided, The Board resumed its work related to Kelowna's infrastructure. After years of conversations around Kelowna getting an airport, in 1946 Ellison Field opened with a single grass runway.¹⁹ This came after decades of lobbying from the Kelowna Board of Trade.

Talk of an airport being constructed in Kelowna was mentioned in The Board's minute books as early as 1927 and was discussed at over 85 Board meetings until its opening.²⁰ The Board worked closely with City Council on airport planning, with joint representatives appointed to address the issue.²¹ The Board pushed hard for an airport in Kelowna to accommodate the arrival of an airmail service.²² Early sites were proposed at almost every location imaginable in the area: the North End at the foot of Knox Mountain, Westbank, Boyce Field, and Lakeshore. However, most were deemed unsuitable by consulting aviation experts.²³

By the late 1930s The Board was seriously considering the possibility of an airport being developed in Rutland and explicitly recognized the need to build public support and potentially hold a plebiscite to fund an airport purchase.²⁴ On August 9, 1938, The Board went through with their plan and purchased two parcels of land in Rutland for airport purposes, while also lobbying the provincial government to reduce tax burdens on the property.²⁵



The Board's leadership extended beyond land acquisition into the coordination of aviation development. By 1944, they had helped form the Kelowna Aviation Council, bringing together civic organizations to coordinate planning for landing fields and future air services.²⁶ Even as attention shifted to the more suitable Ellison Field

site, The Board supported its development and resisted competing proposals that might fragment aviation activity.²⁷ The Board carefully controlled the use of the land acquired in Rutland and refused to allow any commercial aviation activity to occur on the site until the people of Rutland were to express their opinion through a referendum, after Rutland was incorporated as its own municipality.²⁸

Tensions between The Board and the people of Rutland grew as The Board continued to favour centralized aviation development at Ellison. Ultimately, the battle was put to rest at the end of 1947 when The Board decided to sell its share of land in Rutland for \$3000, while maintaining restrictions on commercial use.²⁹ The Board noted in its “Report on the Rutland Property” that “[i]t should be emphasized that the action of The Board of Trade in giving the seventy-three odd acres to the Rutland BCFGAs was prompted by a desire to show Rutland that there was nothing but the friendliest of feelings in Kelowna towards that community.”³⁰ While this may appear as goodwill, it also reflects the Board’s institutionalized control over economic growth.

Ferry-well

Steamships and ferries were a primary mode of transportation for anyone crossing the lake between Westbank and Kelowna. However, as the city got busier, more infrastructure was needed to support the volume of crossings.

In 1946, the Vernon Regional Office for the Bureau of Post-War Rehabilitation asked that the Kelowna Board of Trade consider lobbying for a bridge before Hope-Princeton Highway’s completion.³¹ However, The Board thwarted this idea and instead advocated for increased ferry services: these would include a 24-hour ferry and a second vessel.³² This decision reflected concerns about cost and the belief that services could be scaled to meet regional needs.

Throughout 1940, however, pressure from agricultural demands and commercial interests began to alter The Board’s thinking. Around 1949-50, the anticipated impact of the Hope-Princeton Highway made it evident that the bottleneck of the ferry system was only going to worsen. In response to this, The Board decided that increased ferry services would be a temporary measure while they found a more permanent solution.³³

One might think that The Board would revisit the possibility of a bridge, but this was not the case. The next best solution was thought to be a road between Naramata and Kelowna on the east side of Okanagan Lake.³⁴ This idea had been brought up on numerous occasions pre-dating the discussion of a bridge. The Board made this clear in its minutes, stating that it had “for the last thirty-five years or more consistently urged” completion of what they called the Okanagan East-side Road.³⁵

Unfortunately for The Board, their efforts to construct this roadway were futile. The campaign for the Okanagan East-side Road was gradually met with more conflict from surrounding communities like Summerland and Westbank, who saw less benefit in an east-side route.³⁶ Despite this, The Board continued a silent campaign to win over citizens and even went as far as making direct appeals to the Premier, and Minister of Public Works.³⁷

Finally succumbing to exhaustion, The Board dropped the idea of an east-side route and changed their stance in favour of a bridge. By 1954, The Board formally resolved that the Provincial Government should proceed with bridge construction as soon as possible.³⁸ Following this resolution, they took an active leadership role: organizing a regional campaign; gathering support from other municipalities and Boards of Trade; and submitting briefs to the provincial government throughout 1954.³⁹ This sustained advocacy contributed to provincial action, with tenders for bridge approaches announced in late 1955 and the eventual opening of the Okanagan Lake Bridge in 1958.⁴⁰

The Birth of the Kelowna Chamber of Commerce

In 1961, the Kelowna Board of Trade was re-established under the name of Kelowna Chamber of Commerce. This switch marked a turning point in The Chamber's history.

Whispers of a junior college and vocational school had been circling throughout the Okanagan Valley in the late 1950s.⁴¹ Vernon, Penticton, and Kelowna each vied intensely to obtain the proposed college. By the 60s negotiations for land were underway.⁴² The Chamber then took the initiative to spearhead the quest for a college in Kelowna by bringing the necessary parties together through joint committees and stakeholder meetings.⁴³ In the fall of 1961, this advocacy contributed to Kelowna being announced as the site for a vocational training school.⁴⁴ As planning evolved toward an Okanagan community college, The Chamber remained involved in debating site selection and opposing proposals it viewed as flawed.⁴⁵

Between the 60s and 80s, The Chamber advanced the critical infrastructure and economic capacity in the Kelowna area, including promoting Big White, new in 1963.⁴⁶ The Chamber was a big supporter of Big White's opening and allowed Big White to use its information booth at Reid's Corner as an office for Ski Kelowna.⁴⁷ It continued to work with City Council and the Aviation Advisory Council to expand airport services.⁴⁸ In 1972, The Chamber formed its own dedicated aviation committee.⁴⁹ These efforts helped position Kelowna as an accessible place to do business and vacation.

In the 70s, The Chamber lobbied for better environmental protection, warning of pollution in Okanagan Lake and pushing for stronger wastewater regulations.⁵⁰ Simultaneously, they took part in debates surrounding new zoning proposals that would affect housing affordability and future development.⁵¹

The Chamber's history would not be complete without mentioning Kasugai, Kelowna's sister city. The Chamber has maintained close ties with Kasugai, particularly through visiting business delegations and community exchanges. The relationship was formally established in 1981.⁵² In its early years, The Chamber played an active role in hosting delegations, supporting exchanges, and building connections between the two communities.⁵³

The relationship has also helped lower barriers for business engagement by building familiarity and trust over time. While primarily cultural in nature, its economic outcomes include the promotion of Kelowna wines and product exchanges.⁵⁴ The Chamber is an ongoing presence in the Kelowna–Kasugai partnership.

Arguably one of the most important events of the period between the 60s and 80s was the election of Marion Bremner as The Chamber's first female president. Marion became chair of The Chamber of Commerce in 1985.⁵⁵ Her appointment represented a step away from white, male-dominated leadership and a step toward inclusivity. Bremner's influence extended well beyond The Chamber. She served on City Council for 11 years and came within 232 votes of winning the 1984 mayoral race.⁵⁶ Recognized as Kelowna Chamber's Business Leader of the Year in 2021, Bremner spent countless hours dedicated to improving Kelowna's social infrastructure.⁵⁷

Charting a New Course

The Coquihalla Highway connecting the Lower Mainland to Kelowna was built in phases, beginning with the highway from Hope to Merritt (the Coq) and later extending to the Okanagan through the Okanagan Connector.⁵⁸ Completing the Coq for EXPO 86 left the Okanagan without a direct coastal link.⁵⁹ In response, the Okanagan Coquihalla Connection Committee (OCCC) was formed in 1985 to advocate for an extension from Merritt to Peachland.⁶⁰

Chaired by Kelowna Chamber's Bill Tigg, the OCCC worked side-by-side with The Chamber. Often, meetings were held in Chamber offices, directly involving board members. The Chamber contributed research and policy input on route selection, and actively lobbied provincial decision-makers.⁶¹ These coordinated efforts culminated in the opening of the Okanagan Connector on October 1, 1990, significantly improving the Okanagan's access to the coast.⁶²

OKANAGAN CONNECTOR

Chamber will pay to oppose route

By BRIAN DRISCOLL
Courier Staff

The Kelowna Chamber of Commerce will spend \$2,000 to advertise its opposition to the Ministry of Highway's favored route for the Coquihalla-Okanagan connector.

It is also inviting Okanagan MLAs, including Premier Bill Bennett, to a public meeting planned for sometime within the next 10 days to discuss the routing of the highway.

Chamber directors are opposed to the ministry's proposal to route the connector through Merritt, which adds at least 26 km to the drive between the Okanagan and Hope. They prefer that the highway bypass Merritt by extending the connector from Aspen Grove to Kingsvale.

After several recent meetings with ministry officials, they are convinced the route was chosen for political reasons, and that the public has been misled about the merits of both routes.

Ald. Tom Treadgold, city representative to the chamber, said information provided by the ministry is "simply not true."

He urged the chamber put political pressure on Bennett. "We've got to get to the premier, all the MLAs in the valley, and get down to Victoria and make ourselves heard."

Chamber president Marion

MARION BREMNER
... "political action"

Bremner agreed the chamber must take "political action".

In its newspaper advertisements, the chamber will ask the public to sign a coupon supporting its action and send it to the chamber.

... To step up lobby for a shorter route

Highways Minister Alex Fraser won't return his phone calls, so now he can expect a deluge of telegrams, says Marion Bremner, president of the Kelowna Chamber of Commerce.

At a meeting of the Coquihalla-Okanagan Connector committee to

shorter route between Aspen Gove and Kingsvale.

The ministry is apparently not considering the short route favored by virtually every civic group in the central and north Okanagan. Ministry spokesmen say the route would cost

Following this major infrastructure achievement, The Chamber continued to advocate for long-term regional development, particularly in post-secondary education. In 2000, The Chamber lobbied for full university status for the Okanagan University College.⁶³ By 2003, speculation had emerged that the University of British Columbia might establish a presence in Kelowna.⁶⁴ The Chamber played an active advocacy role in the transition from Okanagan University College to the establishment of UBC Okanagan and Okanagan College. Its advocacy emphasized the importance of comprehensive degree programs, strong research capacity, equitable funding, and meaningful local representation in governance.⁶⁵ The Chamber also contributed to public consultations and policy discussions, emphasizing alignment between post-secondary programming and the needs of the local economy.⁶⁶

All the while, The Chamber maintained its focus on critical infrastructure within the city. It wasn't long after the opening of the Connector that The Chamber began to speak out about the need for a new bridge across Okanagan Lake. Reported concrete cracking and corrosion raised concerns regarding the safety and long-term viability of the bridge.⁶⁷ The Chamber advocated for replacement and expanded capacity, arguing that a four-lane bridge would better accommodate growing traffic demands.⁶⁸ These efforts contributed to the eventual construction of the William R. Bennett Bridge, which began in 2005 and replaced the aging floating bridge.

The Chamber Today and Tomorrow

Looking back at Kelowna's history, it is important to recognize the people and organizations that have made it a place of enduring appeal. The Chamber has been at the forefront of many of the city's most significant accomplishments. It advocated when others could not or would not, spoke up when it mattered most, and ensured that Kelowna always had a voice. The examples outlined here represent only a small portion of its work, as countless other efforts, both large and small, have contributed to the city's development over time.

Having endured more than a century of economic and social change, The Chamber understands what it takes to adapt. Time and again, it has demonstrated foresight in its advocacy and policy work, often positioning itself ahead of the issues facing the business community. In doing so, it has established itself as a consistent, politically neutral, and reliable voice in Kelowna.

More than a century later, the Kelowna Chamber of Commerce continues to do what it has always done: support local businesses and advocate for progress. The environment in which it operates is now far more complex, influenced by rapid change and increasing global pressures. Meeting these challenges is no small task. Yet The Chamber continues to progress by embracing new technologies, engaging younger perspectives, and looking ahead to the needs of tomorrow. If the past century is any indication, The Chamber will continue to be a central voice in Kelowna's evolving history.

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