Remembering Erik Karlsen, FCIP, 1945-2020

As former Chair of the Agricultural Land Commission 2005-2010, Erik Karlsen is acknowledged by then Deputy Minister of Agriculture Larry Pedersen as “a man of great integrity and ingenuity.” Karlsen was a policy entrepreneur before the term was invented. Pedersen recalls long discussions about BC agriculture where he and Karlsen would probe appropriate and creative ways to work with legislative and policy frameworks. They would talk about how to respect as many perspectives as possible while encouraging farming, preserving and protecting farmland in the ALR and setting up farmers for success.

Karlsen was trained as a planner and was elected a Fellow of the Canadian Institute of Planners in 2004. Over a 40-year career he held advisory and management positions at all levels of government and became one of the province’s leading experts on sustainability. Before chairing the ALC, he had served with the BC Ministry of Environment; the Land Use Committee Secretariat; and Regional Growth Strategies in the BC Ministry of Municipal Affairs. He helped found the Georgia Basin Initiative and the Partnership for Water Sustainability and served as a provincial government representative on the Fraser Basin Council. After retiring from government, he taught in the Masters of Environment and Management Program at Royal Roads University.

Guiding Karlsen’s work was a passion for environmental and land use law and policy that made sense and was useful on the ground. Colleague and former Deputy Minister Jon O’Riordan, who worked with Karlsen through the years, notes: “Erik understood how issues were constructed, so he could dis-assemble the parts and re-assemble them in new ways while taking the political context into account. This, along with his consistency of purpose, intellectual rigour and strong personal principles, made him unique.”

As well as a focus on the practical and political aspects of the work, Karlsen developed and shared tools for understanding the nature of the work itself: complex systems and how to manage them. Hundreds of colleagues, students and mentees benefited from approaches such as his “What? - So What? - Now What?” triad for policy planning and action.

Because Karlsen demonstrated respect for everyone, he also earned it. When asked about his secret for navigating policy conflict, he responded: “Unconditional positive regard.” He was unfailingly kind to the people and firm in solving the problems. His legacy is in all the initiatives he helped create and all the people he inspired with his example of good, principled, and imaginative public service.

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