

CHAPTER 2 – WILLIAMS LAKE

2.1 OVERVIEW

This chapter will provide a brief overview of the development of Williams Lake and the context for planning, including the City's physical, historical, demographic, and economic context.

Williams Lake is located in the heart of the traditional Secwepemc Nation known as the Cariboo Chilcotin region of central British Columbia. The first people in the Williams Lake area were of the Shuswap (Secwepemc) Nation, who were part of the Interior Salish peoples. They referred to the area with the Shuswap word "Columneetza," or "the meeting place." Williams Lake is named in honour of Secwepemc Chief William, whose counsel prevented the Shuswap from joining the Chilcotin in their uprising against the settlers.

The City of Williams Lake was incorporated in 1929 and has a total land area of 33 square kilometres or approximately 2,500 hectares. According to the 2006 census, the City of Williams Lake has a population of 10,744, while the population of the City and surrounding market area is approximately 25,000. The City currently has a density of 4.7 people per net hectare, compared to a B.C. municipal average of 7.4 people per net hectare.

The City is the principal centre in the Cariboo Chilcotin region for transportation, trading, financial, educational, healthcare, travel, and administrative services. Many residents from the outlying communities commute daily to jobs or to use the services available in Williams Lake. As a result, the market area for Williams Lake covers approximately 12,500 square kilometres.

2.2 GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

The City is located 552 kilometres north of Vancouver (6-7hours North of Vancouver) and 240 kilometres south of Prince George at the junction of Highway 97, the main north-south thoroughfare in the Province, and Highway 20, which provides the only road access to the Province's beautiful central coast and Bella Coola. The city is situated at the western end of the 11-kilometre long Williams Lake, which drains to the Fraser River through the Williams Lake River, which runs to the south of the downtown. The city is set in a sheltered valley on B.C.'s Interior Plateau and has a north-west south-east orientation within the valley. There are local plateaus on either side of the valley that rise some 300-400 metres from the valley floor. The valley is



surrounded by evergreen forest and sits at an average elevation of 610 metres.

To the east, the Cariboo Mountains create the foothills to the Rockies while to the west lies the Fraser River and the ranching country of the Chilcotin. "Hoodoos," which are natural rock columns carved by millennia of wind and rain, can be seen from the Sheep Creek Ridge on Highway 20, west of the city. These provide a dramatic back drop to the nearby Fraser River.

As the table below shows, climate is generally semi-arid, although there is significant snow accumulation for winter sports, with warm summers and cold winters.

Climate Characteristic	Climate Value*
Annual Rainfall	26.88 cm
Annual Snowfall	192 cm
Average July Temperature	15.5 Celsius
Average January Temperature	-8.7 Celsius
Average Frost Free Days	120
Growing Season	Late May to Mid-September
Annual Sunshine	2,082.1 hours (222 days/year)

*Figures shown are for the Williams Lake airport, elevation 940 meters

2.3 HISTORY

Williams Lake has a colourful and interesting history that incorporates First Nations, prospectors who followed the gold rush, settlers who arrived with the Pacific Great Eastern Railway, and many a rugged cowboy.

Prior to 1860, much of the Cariboo was home to Chilcotin, Carrier and Shuswap Tribal groups who established camps and villages for hunting, fishing and trapping. A number of their trails converged at Williams Lake and what is now the city was a major village.

European fur traders wandered into the country in the early 1800s. Two of the traditional trails that met in Williams Lake became fur brigade trails. In 1840 Roman Catholic Bishop Modeste Demers (1809-1871) visited Chief William at his village, in what is now Glendale and built a chapel there. The Bishop referred to the area as "William's Lake," now "Williams Lake."

When gold was discovered in the Cariboo in the late 1850s, the brigade trails became the main thoroughfare and as miners and entrepreneurs swarmed into the country, Williams Lake became a natural stopping place. By 1860, the area received a rush of miners searching for gold and by 1861 it was the main centre for the gold fields. This created a demand for food supplies, so the "Borland" settlement was established on the west side of Williams Lake to serve as a supply point and farming in the valley began.

Borland remained small because it was bypassed by the Cariboo Wagon Road and most left except William Pinchbeck and William Lyne who turned what is now the City into a huge farm with a flour mill, distillery, stopping place and store. When Pinchbeck died in 1893 Robert Borland bought the property and the Glendale part of the farm was run by the Comer family.



In 1919, the arrival of the Pacific Great Eastern Railway spurred growth. A town site was surveyed and Borland was renamed Williams Lake. The convenience of the railroad also helped the cattle industry and Williams Lake became a supply depot for ranchers. It was incorporated as a village in 1929.

By the early 1950s, lumber was harvested at approximately 150 portable sawmills in the area. Equipment modernization, diesel logging trucks and annual allowable cuts resulted in permanent mills being established in the village, impacting significantly on growth. In 1965 the village assumed town status and remained so until 1981 when it became a city as a result from added growth during the 1970s when the Gibraltar Mine opened. The population increased by 48% between 1971 to 1976, making Williams Lake one of the fastest growing communities in the region at that time. Growth has been moderate in recent years, with an increase in population of 0.7% from 1991 to 1996 and a slight decrease between 1996 to 2001 of -0.7%. However the City Agglomeration population increased significantly between 1991 & 1996 by 11.1% and increased again between 1996 & 2001 by 0.5%, suggesting that there have been some impacts of urban sprawl on the city as more regional residents seek larger homes on larger parcels

Today, Williams Lake enjoys a diversified economic base that includes cattle ranching, forestry, wood manufacturing, mining, tourism, the service industry, and governmental agencies. The predominant industry, however, is forestry. Businesses associated with the forest sector include logging contractors, wood manufacturing, value-added facilities, log home building, logging equipment sales and repairs, industrial suppliers, welding and machining contractors.¹

¹ Williams Lake Culture and Heritage. Super Natural British Columbia: <http://www.hellobc.com/en-CA/CultureandHistory/Williams-Lake.htm> Date visited: March 21, 2011.

2.4 Demographic, Household, and Workforce Characteristics

According to the 2006 Census, Williams Lake has a population of approximately 10,744, with a significant number of seniors and a population of school-age children above the provincial average. It should be noted that about 14% of the population identifies as having aboriginal ancestry. School District 27, which includes Williams Lake, the surrounding communities, and 100 Mile House, has a 24% aboriginal student population. In addition, 9% of the population according to the 2006 census in Williams Lake identified as visible minorities.

The after-tax median household income in Williams Lake is \$47,291, compared to the B.C. median income of \$46,472. In March 2010, 6.6 % of the population received Income Assistance compared to the provincial average of 2.2% percent. At the same time there were 800 persons on Employment Assistance.

The community's economy remains focused on the resource and manufacturing sectors, but a significant number of residents are employed in the service and institutional sector, which reflects Williams Lake's situation as the commercial and service hub for the Cariboo Chilcotin region.