

Indigenous Organizations Increasingly Being Funded by B.C. Corporation

Sam Laskaris

CANDO CONTRIBUTOR



Laurel Douglas
ETSI-BC

Laurel Douglas has certainly proven to be a changemaker. Douglas was brought on board as the CEO of ETSI-BC in May 2020. The full name for the British Columbia-based not-for-profit corporation is the Economic Trust of the Southern Interior. ETSI-BC, previously known as the Southern Interior Development Initiative Trust, was launched in 2006 by the B.C. government to administer a \$50 million endowment fund that was intended to support economic investment in the southern interior of the province. Governance of the trust is carried out by the 13 individuals who serve on ETSI-BC's board of directors. Five of the board members are appointed by the province. The other eight are district representatives within ETSI-BC's coverage area.

This article draws on a personal interview with the author in August 2022.

Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development 2023, 13(1), 36-40; <https://doi.org/10.54056/FISN3678>

Douglas' time with ETSI-BC has certainly been heralded, including by officials of Indigenous communities. A total of 32 First Nations lie within ETSI-BC's responsibility locations. Since Douglas' arrival, they have no longer felt neglected. "Up until I joined ETSI-BC, we had only ever funded three Indigenous organizations in the entire time that we had been in existence," she said. "And since then, we've funded 15 different organizations."

It didn't take Douglas long to start earning recognition for her accomplishments at ETSI-BC. Slightly more than a year after she joined the corporation, Douglas was recognized as one of B.C.'s most influential leaders by Business In Vancouver (BIV). Leaders in 14 sectors were chosen. Douglas was selected in the Public Sector and Economy category. "Criteria for this recognition [were] based on months of research into what's important to the BC economy," read a BIV release. "Individuals were selected based on a range of factors, including achievement within an organization or sector, professional contributions, peer recognition, awards and other recognitions, board appointments, community and political engagement, philanthropy and non-profit work, and more" (ETSI-BC, 2021).

Several months before that accolade was bestowed upon Douglas, she was selected as the Business Leader of the Year for 2020 by the Kelowna Chamber of Commerce. Kelowna Chamber President Jeffrey Robinson praised Douglas' earlier work efforts and felt ETSI-BC and its partners would benefit from her hiring. "Laurel, through her long-standing support of the community, has enriched our city and our region," Robinson said. "She has championed entrepreneurs and provided valuable community leadership in the economic development and post-secondary sectors. She continues to leave a legacy of strategic thinking, impact, and collaboration in the positions she has held. In her new role at ETSI-BC, we are confident that her steady hand and clear-headed planning will create great outcomes for this important regional economic development organization" (Kelowna Chamber, 2020).

Douglas believes her corporation could have done a better job in the past of letting Indigenous communities know what it is all about. "We had a very low profile with our Indigenous partners, and that's what we're trying to correct by reaching out to them proactively," she said. "It's the project consultants and myself who are having those conversations with the different representatives of the 32 First Nations that are located in our region."

Douglas said ETSI-BC reps have been on their own awareness-raising campaign for the last couple of years. "We're trying to engage with the 32 First Nations in our region and make sure they know about the support we provide and to encourage them to partner with local governments and non-profits. I have a strong belief that collaboration breeds better outcomes, and so we need to engage better with our Indigenous partners," she said. Douglas is confident that positive steps are being taken. "We're definitely making progress," she said. "We actually have a plan right now to reach out to each of the First Nations just to make sure they know about us and that we have the right connections with the people in charge of economic development."

Douglas added that a major shift in thinking has taken place since she joined ETSI-BC. "We really redirected the organization to be more of an economic development funding organization and support the non-profits, the First Nations, and communities in our region," she said. "Previously, the organization did a lot of Indigenous lending, directly providing financial assistance to businesses to help create jobs. So now we're doing it in a more indirect way."

Douglas also said simply getting out and meeting various Indigenous leaders from different communities has proven to be beneficial. "I enjoy the fact that I think we've suc-

ceeded in really engaging with the community in a meaningful way,” she said. “We’ve got a lot of engagement and a lot of First Nations in our intakes now. We’ve had a lot of input during our consultation process, where we basically went out and asked communities what they were looking for. We had excellent participation by all the stakeholders in those discussions. We’re really creating an economic trust that is really integrated into the fabric of the region. So, I’m pleased with that.”

Paul Wiest, a project manager for ETSI-BC, said three recent Indigenous projects his corporation has been involved with include the ʔaqam community, the city of Cranbrook, and a venture titled Boston Bar.

The ʔaqam community is nestled beside the St. Mary’s River and has large pieces of land next to the Kootenay Rockies International Airport. “Funding from ETSI-BC will allow the community to hire a project manager to assist in the development of the industrial lands at the airport and support new business investment,” Wiest said.

Meanwhile, ETSI-BC funding contributed to a feasibility assessment for an interpretive centre, a collaboration between Ktunaxa First Nation, and the city of Cranbrook. “The City of Cranbrook recognized that, as part of their work towards truth and reconciliation, they needed to collaborate with the Ktunaxa First Nation in establishing their vision of a tourism interpretive centre that would have a more visual and tangible presence of the Ktunaxa history and culture for visitor experiences,” Wiest said.

As for the Boston Bar initiative, Wiest offered the following thought. “This project will provide an avenue for tourists to better understand the history of the local Indigenous communities that reside within the Fraser Canyon and contribute to First Nations reconciliation and collaboration,” he said.

ETSI-BC is not only involved with massive projects. It also helps others on a somewhat smaller scale. For example, in early 2022, it was announced that Enactus Okanagan College had received a \$25,000 grant from ETSI-BC to help launch and expand student-led projects that create environmental and community impact. Enactus Okanagan College is a student-run organization. The grant it received from ETSI-BC was intended to support economic development projects that will have noteworthy benefits that are also long-lasting for the region. “We are excited to see how this grant helps Enactus grow, teaching more people entrepreneurship and community development skills while generating insights and learning for future projects,” Douglas said (Verster, 2022).

Douglas believes she was well suited for her ETSI-BC position. “My background is in economic development,” she said. “I switched out of the corporate sector many years ago, having had a career in finance [and] tech, and I’ve led several major economic development organizations in B.C. I offered to reconfigure this organization back in 2020,” she said. “It was something I had a unique skillset for.” Douglas’ credentials were also praised in an Investkelowna.com blog dated November 28, 2022. “Prior to making the shift to economic development, her corporate career spanned senior underwriting, business development, and strategic planning roles in the tech sector in Canada, France, Germany, and the UK, with major telecom equipment manufacturers and financial services firms,” the blog said. “Ms. Douglas has been a co-founder or angel investor in several tech ventures along the way” (COEDC, 2022).

While pleased with the recent work ETSI-BC has accomplished, Douglas believes even more can be done. The capacity to implement some goals can be improved. “We’d like to have more funding available, obviously,” Douglas said. “I think that’s the limitation we’ve found. We’ve had some issues in the past relating to the lending [that] was done that [may

have] limited our [grant] budget. While I'm building our relationships and the number of people who apply to us for funding, I'm also trying to build that relationship with better funders and also build up our asset base again as well." Following its final funding intake for 2022, which closed on Nov. 1, ETSI-BC officials announced they had received a total of 33 applications, requesting a total of more than \$900,000 in funding. But for this particular intake, ETSI-BC was planning to divvy up a total of \$375,000.

Douglas, who is not Indigenous, is one of just two ETSI-BC staff members. The corporation also has four project contractors. "We're trying really hard to reduce the overhead so that we can get as much money out to the communities as possible," Douglas said. She added that she doesn't believe it is an issue that ETSI-BC staff do not have any Indigenous ancestry. "What we do have is an increasing number of Indigenous board members now," she said. "So, the whole governance structure changed, which is going to have a lot more direct input from the First Nations in our region." Douglas believes this is rather important. "We're trying to make sure that our support is provided throughout the entire region to all of the residents, including the First Nations," she said. "There's been sort of a lack of engagement in the past."

More First Nations involvement will happen in part because of the Declaration Act Action Plan, which the B.C. government released this past March. The action plan includes information on how to implement requirements for the Declaration of Rights for Indigenous Peoples. "We're all going to be participating in this process, which the provincial government will be leading, to involve First Nations in our region in the governance of our organizations," Douglas said.

Douglas believes there are various ways to determine ETSI-BC's success. "Economic development is one of those nebulous fields," she said. "You can count the number of jobs that your projects help to create or maintain. Or you can count the number of businesses that your projects have helped start or keep in business. But that's not really the only indicator for us." Douglas added ETSI-BC officials are focused on relationship building. "We want to create value for the economic development ecosystem in our region," she said. "So, relationships and the number of partners and the number of people that apply for projects for funding from us in our intakes — those are all indicators of how successful we've been reaching out and connecting with the right people."

Douglas also said her corporation tracks the specific outcomes of each project. "We're a funding agency, so each project will have different performance indicators they will have to report on," she said. "But for us as an organization, the number of engagements we have and the partners that we have [are] super important. The number of sectors we support is key because we want to make sure we have a really well-diversified economy in our region."

Douglas also has a message she'd like to pass on to youth. "There's a lot of focus on young people finding a job where they're making a difference," she said. "Economic development is an area where you can make a difference. It's a field that is kind of hard to define, but it's a great area for younger people to consider making a difference in. You get to make lots of connections with different players in an ecosystem, and you can get creative with taking the assets your community has and combining them in a different way to help people have a greater quality of life."

WORKS CITED

Kelowna Chamber. (2020, November 19). "Chamber Announces Business Leader of 2020". News Release. Retrieved from https://www.kelownachamber.org/news/post/564/Chamber_Announces_Business_Leader_of_2020/

- Economic Trust of the Southern Interior (ETSI-BC). (2021, August 9). “Laurel Douglas recognized as one of BC’s most influential business leaders by Business in Vancouver”. New Release. Retrieved from <https://www.etsi-bc.ca/laurel-douglas-recognized-as-on-of-bcs-most-influential-business-leaders-by-business-in-vancouver/>
- Central Okanagan Economic Development Commission (COEDC). (2022, November 28). “Meet the COEDC — Laurel Douglas”. Blog. Retrieved from <https://www.investkelowna.com/blog/meet-the-coedc-laurel-douglas/>
- Verster, L. (2022, February 21). “Grant supports student-led projects by Enactus OC”. *Vernon Matters*. Retrieved from <https://vernonmatters.ca/2022/02/01/grant-supports-student-led-projects-by-enactus-oc/>