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Meet the new boss

Harry Gairns has gone from the middle-of-nowhere to the top of the forest industry to the beginning of the Liberal government's health care revolution

The newly-appointed chair of the newly-created Northern Health Authority has uniquely first-hand knowledge of the problems facing rural health care. He was born and raised in the tiny village of Atlin, tucked in the far northwest of B.C. near the Yukon border. There were no telephones and no roads. Now Harry Gairns has the challenge of ensuring efficient delivery of health care to the largest geographical health-care region in the province, the Northern Health Authority. In that massive area — 63 per cent of B.C.'s land mass — are numerous tiny communities like Atlin, as well as regional centres like Prince George. One of Mr. Gairns' biggest hurdles in the next three years will be linking those communities together.

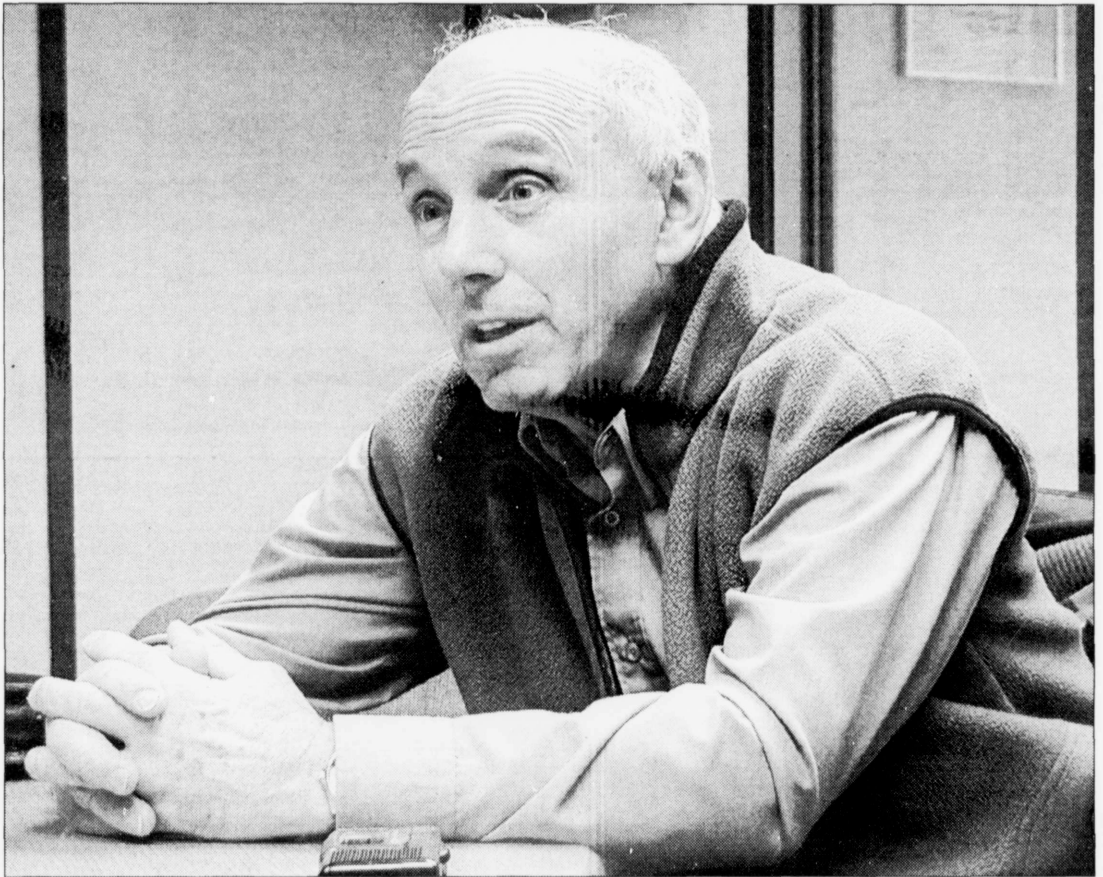
"In the south they have hospitals within a half an hour of each other," he says. "In our health authority most of our hospitals have hundreds of miles between them."

But Mr. Gairns is no stranger to building successful ventures in B.C.'s north. The professional engineer formed a forestry consulting firm in Prince George, Industrial Forest Services, 30 years ago. By the time he semi-retired eight years ago it was the largest firm of its type in the country. In 1985 he became president of a consortium of mapping companies charged with the digital mapping of the province. It was a seven-year project, co-ordinating the efforts of numerous companies scattered between PG and Vancouver. But its scale pales in comparison to running a health region that stretches from the northernmost border of the province to just past Quesnel.

Mr. Gairns became involved in health care in PG in a way many others did — as part of the Multiplex rally in June of 2000.

From there he joined the citizens health group, chairing the education sub-committee. But it wasn't until 10 days before the restructuring of the health regions was announced that Mr. Gairns found out he was to be the chair of the Northern authority.

The first order of business now, he says, is finding people



Harry Gairns founded one of Canada's most successful forestry consulting companies. Now he's trying to work his magic with the north's health care. JENNIFER PARKS/FREE PRESS

to assist him. He has to round-up nine board members within three months. He hopes to have that complete in something closer to two.

"Right away we have to get a board. Right now, I'm the board," he says. The board will be headquartered in Prince George and meet monthly with the ministers of health. "We'd like to have gender equality on the board, some business people, people with health care experience, people who represent each of the three service delivery areas (northeast, northwest and northern interior) ... There are enough guidelines that we can't possibly fit them all. It's most important to find good people."

Nine people representing approximately 320,000 health-care recipients spread over hundreds of miles. Some critics are already saying it doesn't provide enough representation for such a huge area, especially for smaller communities. But Mr. Gairns says concentrating the voice of northern communities will improve efficiency and make for a louder voice in Victoria.

"In the past a place like Prince George was just one of 52 regions when they want to talk to Victoria. Now we're one of six," he says. The new funding structure will also help those smaller communities. Instead of doling-out individualized sums to each small area the Northern

Authority will receive their funding in one lump payment. That will mean less duplication of services, says Mr. Gairns, and improved access to funding. "And the province will hold each health board accountable for the quality of service provided."

Referral patterns that, in the past, have meant citizens of some B.C. towns travelling to Alberta to receive care — such as people in Dawson Creek being referred to Grande Prairie — will have to stay for now, says Mr. Gairns, but he hopes eventually the Northern Health Authority can be self-contained for most services.

Assuming control of the 15 individual authorities now

under the Northern Authority umbrella while at the same time making sure patient care doesn't skip a beat is another challenge for the new board.

"The whole system has to keep running while these changes happen. It's a little like fixing a road while keeping the traffic moving."

Mr. Gairns is hoping that roadwork will be done in three years. That's the length of his appointment as board chair and he doesn't plan on a second term.

"At the end of those three years I'll be glad to turn it over to someone else. It's going to be a heavy load during those three years but for the next person it would be easier. Systems will be in place and established."