

**A Governance & Structural Review**  
of  
**BC Soccer Premier League**



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## BCSPL/OPDL COMPARATIVE REVIEW

### Ontario Player Development League (OPDL)

The Ontario Player Development League (OPDL) was launched in 2014 with just one age group (U13), girls and boys. The League scales out adding one age group each year until U17 in 2018. A U23 age group is slated to be added in 2019, although this may be substituted with Ontario's new and emerging adult league, League One Ontario. Franchises (or 'License Holders', as they are referred to in the OPDL) were originally sourced by process of RFP in 2013, with a maximum of 24 licenses on offer. 18 licenses were initially issued to clubs, fielding boys and girls teams (with the exception of Toronto FC (boys only) and Ottawa Fury (girls only)).

Unlike BCSPL, OPDL launched exclusively as a club program. OSA-affiliated private academies (Ontario-Recognized Non-Club Academies (ORNCA's)) were originally not permitted entry, but have subsequently been granted eligibility for entry in 2016. Districts are not permitted to participate directly in the OPDL with teams, but can play a role facilitating applications from clubs within their jurisdictions. Furthermore, at the end of 2014, it was mutually decided that professional or semi-professional club academies would not be eligible for OPDL participation, bringing the League into compliance with the newly-released CSA Player Pathway. This reduced the number of OPDL licenses in 2015 to 16.

Two year licenses are issued to clubs that satisfactorily meet more than 65 technical, facilities and organizational standards of excellence, assessed through the RFP application process. Licenses are issued solely on the basis of applicant organizations' ability to meet (and exceed) standards criteria and are not regulated geographically in any way. On expiration of the two-year term, licenses are automatically renewed if mutually agreed by the League and License Holder. However, breach of standards during the license term can lead to non-renewal of a license by the League, or even revoking of a license midterm if the breaches are severe enough.

The majority of the League's standards are technical in nature, with the focus very much on driving player development through technical excellence in OPDL clubs through coach quality and appropriately designed and delivered periodized training programs. OPDL is seen as a direct extension of the Ontario Soccer Association's youth high performance system, with a strong emphasis on the quality of training, as well as match play. OPDL teams are not eligible for the Ontario Cup or Canadian Club Championships and tournament participation outside of the OPDL is not permitted without permission from the OSA Technical Director. OPDL is used as the chief scouting and player selection vehicle for the OSA's provincial program in areas where the League has license holder presence. In areas of the province where there is no OPDL presence, OSA Talent-On-Location events assess and select players on a direct-to-athlete basis.

## Governance

OPDL is governed as a program under the direct control and operations of the Ontario Soccer Association. The program is headed by the OSA's Technical Director, who manages it as one of the many tools through which to carry out the Association's player, coach and officials development mandate. The League has no Board of Directors or independent statutory standing. The League's finances are budgeted and reported as a program within the overall OSA budget and associated financial statements.

OPDL is staffed by OSA staff, who also have other non-OPDL responsibilities. There are currently no official Committees for the League and the League's progress is reported as appropriate by the Technical Director and/or Executive Director to the OSA Board of Directors as part of the regular technical reporting for the Association.

## Standards Enforcement & Performance Management

The cornerstone of the OPDL is not only the high standards that are required of its License Holders, but the rigorous manner in which they are enforced. On granting of a license, OPDL clubs sign a License Agreement that binds them to the policies and procedures outlined in a number of governing documents. It is through these documents and the systems of enforcement and evaluation that underpin them that the OPDL extends its systems of governance beyond its own operations to those of its License Holder clubs. These governing documents include:

- **Technical Manual** - explaining the technical philosophy under which all OPDL players must be trained and teams must play.
- **Operations Manual** - outlining operating policies and general League management policies (similar to League Rules & Regulations documents in other Leagues).
- **Game Day Guidelines (including Codes of Conduct)** - outlining procedures, protocols and expectations of teams on the day of OPDL competition.
- **Hosting Guidelines** - explaining standards and expectations of OPDL License Holders when they are hosting home games.
- **Trials Guidelines** - required protocol for OPDL License Holders when conducting trials at the end of the season<sup>1</sup>.
- **Medical Guidelines** - explaining protocol (and the role of both the League and the License Holder) for the management of injuries, including concussion management and post-injury rehabilitation.
- **Sponsorship & Logo Usage Guidelines** - outlining how the OPDL logo can and cannot be used, together with rights of OPDL sponsors at OPDL games and other OPDL properties.
- **Discipline Code** - a bespoke discipline code outlining how OPDL discipline cases are managed<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> OPDL License Holders are required to conduct at least three open trials each year to ensure new players have constant access to the League.

The League also issues a Referee's Game Day Guide for the League's officials, a Parents Handbook for players' parents and a OPDL Coordinator Job Instructions document for onsite OPDL event staff.

Standards are actively enforced through:

- License Agreements
- OPDL License Holder Audits (technical and organizational)
- Active Game Monitoring (by technical staff)
- OPDL Discipline Code
- License Holder Annual Performance Reviews

## Operations

### League Structure

Central Venues

OPDL operates in two conferences - Western and Eastern - with some games played in-conference and some interleague (against opposition in the other conference). In 2014, all League rounds of play were played at approved central venues, whereby all games in each conference would be played at one neutral venue, with all teams in the conference travelling to that location. High quality facilities in southern Ontario universities were targeted and selected as central venues and went through a process of inspection and approval by the League. This central venue system of League play is unique to Canadian soccer and was designed to allow OSA/CSA and other appropriate scouting personnel maximum opportunity to observe the development of participating players.

In 2015, a hybrid model is being implemented whereby all in-conference games (2/3 of all games) will be played on a traditional home and away basis, with interleague rounds (1/3 of all games) continuing to be played at central venues and providing ample scouting options. The League schedule has also been reduced to 22 games to avoid playing into late November.

Centralized Game Day Management

Unlike other Leagues, OPDL also takes a more active role in the onsite management of League games. At central venues (ie. all games in 2014), the League manages and pays for all aspects of game day operations, including:

- field rentals
- referee assignment & mentoring
- field medical staff provision
- technical oversight
- onsite event management (including dedicated field staff)

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<sup>2</sup> Note that this Code does not supersede nor conflict with OSA Published Rules, which are still followed and complied with in the assessment and adjudication of OPDL discipline cases.

OPDL has been able to provide a consistently high level of game day quality across the League, significantly advance its referee development program, and also drive important strategic partnerships with some universities resulting in the development of new facilities and the upgrade of existing ones.

## **BC Soccer Premier League (BCSPL)**

BC Soccer's BCSPL was launched in 2011 and is entering its fourth season of play. The League operates both genders in five age groups from U13 up to U18 (no U17), although member franchises are free to add or remove teams in all age groups year-to-year at their discretion. Unlike the OPDL, which took a scaled approach to its development, BCSPL launched in all gender age group categories simultaneously in 2011. Whilst it is universally and retrospectively acknowledged that this approach was perhaps not the best for the older age groups in particular, it has meant that the BCSPL has developed quickly and started to produce performance results already<sup>3</sup>.

BCSPL operates with eight regionally-defined franchises - six in the Lower Mainland, one on Vancouver Island and one in the Okanagan Valley Interior - that were issued to operating parties by means of an RFP process. Unlike the OPDL, BCSPL does not limit franchise holders to affiliated clubs. Accordingly, some BCSPL franchises are operated directly by BC Soccer district bodies, whilst others are held by large pre-existing community soccer clubs who have the requisite youth player bases to make such a program viable. Private soccer academies are not eligible to hold BCSPL.

Franchises were issued to the eight founding members based on RFP applications that sourced primarily technical information from applicant organizations. All eight founding franchises remain today, although there has been challenges in the establishment of some franchises, particularly in the Fraser Valley<sup>4</sup>.

BCSPL is well supported by higher soccer development agents in the form of Whitecaps FC's residency program (boys) and the CSA's REX program (girls), which has just launched in 2014 in collusion with BC Soccer and Whitecaps FC. Both the CSA and Whitecaps FC are clear and active partners of the BCSPL and use the League as a clear primary talent pool for player selection.

## **Governance**

BCSPL is governed and run through a separate statutory body, as a non-profit society under the BC Society Act, with its own Board of Governors and staff. The Board of Governors is comprised of one representative of each of the eight founding franchises and is responsible for all affairs relating to the management and development of the League. Much of this work is undertaken through a General Manager, who is employed directly by the League. A referee development staff resource has also just been recruited.

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<sup>3</sup> Although BC athlete selection in junior national teams is already exceeding targeted levels, there is no clear evidence that this is as a result of the BCSPL.

<sup>4</sup> This franchise has struggled to maintain sustainable operations and has been re-issued to new franchise holding parties and renamed through direct intervention from BC Soccer.

Aside from the Board of Governors, the BCSPL also has a Technical Sub-Committee, that is made up of the technical leadership of the eight BCSPL franchises and CSA REX and Whitecaps FC partners. The Sub-Committee is chaired by the BC Soccer Director of Soccer Development and focuses on all technical matters related to the League.

The operational affairs of the League are managed by its General Manager. To that end, BCSPL is able to self-manage much of the operational affairs and day-to-day activities<sup>5</sup> of the League without significant capacity input from BC Soccer. The independence of the BCSPL also allows for clear and transparent financial reporting on the League's operations and financial sustainability.

Franchises are held accountable to League standards through certain clauses in the BCSPL Constitution; there is presently no formal Agreement or other such contract binding franchises to the League. League standards exist in the BCSPL's Technical Operations Manual and Rules & Regulations documents.

## Operations

The BC Soccer playing season runs from February until November, which is contrary to the normal playing season in BC Soccer<sup>6</sup>. A Cup competition (BC Soccer Premier Cup), which non-BCSPL teams have access to, is also played alongside League fixtures, the winner of which represents BC at the Canadian Club Championships.

The decision to operate BCSPL as a summer league rather than a winter league was to bring it in line with the rest of Canadian soccer<sup>7</sup> and the Canadian Soccer Association youth high performance calendar (with respect to player selection, camp scheduling, etc). This has created challenges in the integration of the BCSPL with the underlying community soccer infrastructure and there is significant support for the idea of moving the BCSPL season to be a winter league, in line with its surrounding soccer community.

League operations of the BCSPL are relatively small, with much of the League being 'self-managed' by participating franchises, similar to conventional youth soccer leagues. BCSPL League operations are managed through the League's General Manager, who is primarily responsible for schedule development, maintenance of League standings, referee assignment and other operational matters.

BCSPL games are played on a home and away basis at participating franchises' fields. Franchises are responsible for field bookings and general game day management. There is no routine BCSPL presence at BCSPL games and the League does not provide any onsite staff support. Field selection is at the discretion of BCSPL franchises and there is no process of venue approval or required venues standards

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<sup>5</sup> This volume of work is difficult to quantify, but can amount to a significant amount of hidden work in managing the many and varied questions, queries, minor disputes and liaisons with participating clubs, teams, coaches and parents.

<sup>6</sup> The soccer season normally runs from September through winter until March in the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island.

<sup>7</sup> BC Soccer is the only province/territory that schedules its outdoor soccer season over the winter period (and even in BC, this season schedule is not followed north of the Lower Mainland).

by the BC SPL. Game day requirements are minimal and limited to minor game protocol and the provision of ice/water and tents at game time.

There are no medical support services at BC SPL games, outside of what franchises bring as part of their management team. Furthermore, there does not appear to be any centralized guidelines on injury management, nor central gathering of medical data on injuries or injury recovery.

## SWOT Analysis

Conducting of SWOT analysis for both Leagues shows OPDL and BC SPL to be very similar in terms of their ultimate strategic goals and targets, with similar core principles around standards-based program delivery based on a player-centric, LTPD-driven approach, in partnership with the youth soccer infrastructure available in British Columbia and Ontario respectively.

The Leagues differ, however, in how they have been executed and what has been deemed a priority. This gives each League clear and mutually-exclusive pro's and con's.

The BC SPL has launched two years ahead of the OPDL and hence has a higher level of maturity and acceptance in the BC soccer community than the OPDL. As the League launched across all age groups at once, there are less risks concerning scalability and sustainability under its current business model. The League has strong regional coverage, has had success in forming defined partnerships with community soccer, and is affordable for participant players, within the context of comparable youth high performance programs in other sports and jurisdictions.

The BC SPL's operations run relatively smoothly, but are not complex nor demanding of high staff capacity. To that end, the League has not delivered a number of core functions that many deem to be essential in a standards-driven program of its nature. In particular, the League's standards are not clearly defined in one document and there are no structured systems of standards enforcement or program/franchise evaluation and performance management. There appears to be no referee development program (despite this being a defined goal of the League), nor is there dedicated, defined coach education of the BC SPL coaching faculty.

The OPDL, by comparison, is still in its infancy and so its full acceptance from the surrounding Ontario soccer club community has yet to fully mature. The League has been extremely ambitious in its design, with much attention and resources focused on new League functionality needed to ensure a genuine standards-based player development model is executed. However, this strict standards-based approach has created challenges and risks in relation to league costs, geographical coverage/accessibility and potential sustainability in older age groups. To that end, whilst the OPDL is ideologically an extremely high quality League, it's operating model as fully-fledged League has still to be realized.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Clearly, there is a lack of clarity regarding the governance framework for the BC SPL amongst its stakeholders. In this confusion, clear gaps exist in the system, particularly in the area of control. As a priority, it is important that the governance framework of the League is 'disentangled' and clarity given as to what each stakeholder is fundamentally responsible for.

To that end, Capitis Consulting recommends that BC Soccer assume a more active governance role within the BC SPL, given the importance of the League as a core agent of execution for some of the Association's core strategic technical goals. BC Soccer should take a more active role on the Board of Governors, but also take firmer responsibility for strategic technical oversight and standards enforcement within the League's franchises. Moreover, BC Soccer should take the lead on broader franchise performance evaluation<sup>8</sup> that may include evaluation of organizational standards, as well as technical ones.

BC Soccer should also take a more proactive stance in the provision of services to the BC SPL, that are more effectively delivered centrally through the provincial governing body as part of province-wide initiatives, rather than incrementally and independently at League level. Such functions should be part of the natural mandate of a PSO<sup>9</sup> in any sport.

Within the structure of the BC SPL, steps should be taken to disentangle operational activities from strategic responsibilities (which appear to routinely fall by the wayside, in lieu of the former). This should involve the Board of Governors assuming a more strategic position, with structures being put in place to manage League operational affairs more effectively outside of the Boardroom.

Finally, beyond the governance and structural concerns of the BC SPL, Capitis Consulting has observed some broader systemic issues that are impacting the development and effectiveness of the BC SPL and should be addressed if possible.

Specifically, Capitis Consulting makes the following recommendations with respect to the governance and structural development of the BC SPL.

**1. Do not materially establish or manifest BC SPL as a district body, voting League body or as a traditional 'member' organization of BC Soccer**

It is the opinion of Capitis Consulting that establishing the League as a voting member of BC Soccer further positions the BC SPL as a traditional League body and arms-reach affiliate member of BC Soccer, rather than the extension of the BC Soccer high performance program that it is

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<sup>8</sup> This is difficult for the Board of Governors under its current structure without routinely putting Governors in a position of Conflict of Interest.

<sup>9</sup> Provincial Sport Organization

intended to be. To that end, progress should be made to bring the League closer to BC Soccer, rather than further crystallize it as a completely separate entity.

## **2. Establish structured representation for BC Soccer on the BCSPL Board of Governors**

The current Board of Governors should be expanded to include two new members. One of these new members should be the incumbent Director of Soccer Development (or equivalent technical lead) for BC Soccer. The other should be a member of the Board of Directors of BC Soccer, to be selected and appointed by this Board (although it is recommended that this person be the Chairman of the High Performance Committee or other such Committee that has Board responsibility for high performance.) It is further recommended that the Governor appointed from the BC Soccer Board of Directors automatically serve as President of the BCSPL and Chair of the Board of Governors to:

- a. Ensure BC Soccer's Board of Directors maintains an active leadership role in the BCSPL.
- b. Ensure that the Chair of the Board of Governors remains unencumbered with the responsibilities of franchise leadership, and the associated risk of conflict of interest.

## **3. Create an Operations Committee**

This Committee should manage much of the operationally-focused agenda items and discussion that currently resides in the BCSPL Boardroom. The Committee should be granted authority to make operational decisions, in tandem with the BCSPL General Manager. Chaired by the BCSPL General Manager, the Committee should contain representatives of each franchise at their discretion (eg. the President and Technical Director may attend if the franchise sees fit) with BC Soccer's Director of Soccer Development an ex officio member.

## **4. Charge BC Soccer with the responsibility of active oversight, evaluation and enforcement of League standards within the BCSPL and its franchises.**

- a. Write clear, published performance standards (technical and otherwise) for the League  
The BCSPL should more clearly define overall League standards and issue them in a clear public document, where possible moving from recommended standards to mandated ones. Aside from agreed technical standards, the BCSPL should consider extending to include some core organizational standards. This can be achieved as part of the implementation of a BC Soccer Club Charter.
- b. Establish evaluation and oversight capability into BC Soccer's technical team  
To perform the substantial role of BCSPL program evaluation and oversight, BC Soccer must shift the focus of its technical team from running programs, to evaluating them. This may require a re-tooling of the skill set in its technical team to ensure it has technical evaluation skills, rather than purely technical program execution skills. (ie. moving from coaching in the middle, to evaluating with a clipboard on the sideline).

c. Establish governance systems of control that enable BC Soccer to actively enforce League standards

Currently, the power to enforce standards on BC SPL franchises rests within the BC SPL Constitution, that all BC SPL members must comply with. This appears to fundamentally bind BC SPL members to League standards, in lieu of a Franchise Agreement (which has been used by the OPDL). However, further amendments and detail should be added to ensure BC Soccer has suitable instruments to enforce standards and apply punitive measures where breaches occur.

- i. Amend and expand Article 3 (Membership), Section 5) of the BC SPL Constitution detailing accountability specifics put in place.
- ii. Expand BC SPL Discipline Guidelines to include discipline protocol for breach of BC SPL standards (ie. discipline over and above the published rules of BC Soccer).
- iii. Move the Technical Sub-Committee to be a committee of BC Soccer, reporting to the BC Soccer Director of Soccer Development, with the BC SPL General Manager an ex officio member.
  - This positions the Technical Sub-Committee as the vehicle through which technical development of the League can occur with clear oversight from BC Soccer as a component of BC Soccer high performance programming, rather than an independent body.

**5. Charge BC Soccer with the responsibility to provide greater corporate & technical support to the BC SPL**

a. Provide stronger marketing, promotional & sponsorship development support

This should range from clear endorsement of the BC SPL in public statements from the BC Soccer President, to dedicated marketing/communications support. Such services are more effective when managed at a provincial level, with BC SPL managed as a property within the broader suite of properties under BC Soccer's management, driving economies of scale and enhanced value-add (particularly re sponsorship development).

b. Centralize the full referee function of the BC SPL through BC Soccer

Whilst BC SPL has recently recruited referee development staff resources, Capitis Consulting believes the development of referees should fundamentally be a responsibility of BC Soccer and such development resources should be forthcoming to the BC SPL as a matter of course. Moreover, BC SPL represents an excellent opportunity to drive the development of the Province's top young referees, particularly through the mentoring opportunities it presents. The OSA has demonstrated how effective this can be with its application of the OPDL to its broader referee development program. To that end, it is recommended that BC Soccer assume full responsibility for BC SPL referee

assignment and payment, as well as their overall development as part of a broader province-wide program of referee development.

c. Consider a dedicated BCSPL coach education program

Although BCSPL coaches are developed under broader BC Soccer coach development initiatives, BC Soccer should consider a bespoke coach development program for BCSPL coaches, which could be delivered in partnership with Whitecaps FC. Establishing a bespoke program will have the following benefits:

- i. A larger pool of advanced coaches will be developed.
- ii. Core coach leadership will be developed to help drive sustainability in BC's coaching capacity.
- iii. Coach education becomes an attractive value-added benefit to attract coaches to coach at BCSPL franchises.
- iv. The player-centric culture of the BCSPL will be engrained into the program.
- v. Inter-franchise coach cooperation and teamwork will increase.

**6. Charge the BCSPL Board of Governors with the role of effectively and efficiently managing the strategic development and operations of the BCSPL**

a. Make the BCSPL Board of Governors responsible for long term, strategic responsibilities:

*i. Long term planning (strategic, financial)*

Development of a BCSPL strategic plan, supported by longer term financial planning in line with BC Soccer's associated planning processes.

*ii. Performance analysis*

In conjunction with BC Soccer, building and monitoring a KPI framework that measures the effectiveness of the BCSPL in achieving its long term goals.

*iii. Rules & policy development*

Beyond the current Rules & Regulations, governing franchise practice and behaviour in more detail and supporting League standards. The Board of Governors should be given authority to approve such rules and policies without requiring ratification from a higher authority.

*iv. Risk management*

Enterprise-wide, considering all elements of risk from systemic to technical, incorporated into the League's long term planning, at a level of tolerance defined by the Board of Governors.

b. Maintain Board of Governors responsibility for operational League management

i. Day-to-day operations driven through League staff in liaison with the BCSPL Operations Committee:

- covering League scheduling, game day hosting oversight, sponsor fulfilment, League communications, AGM management, etc)

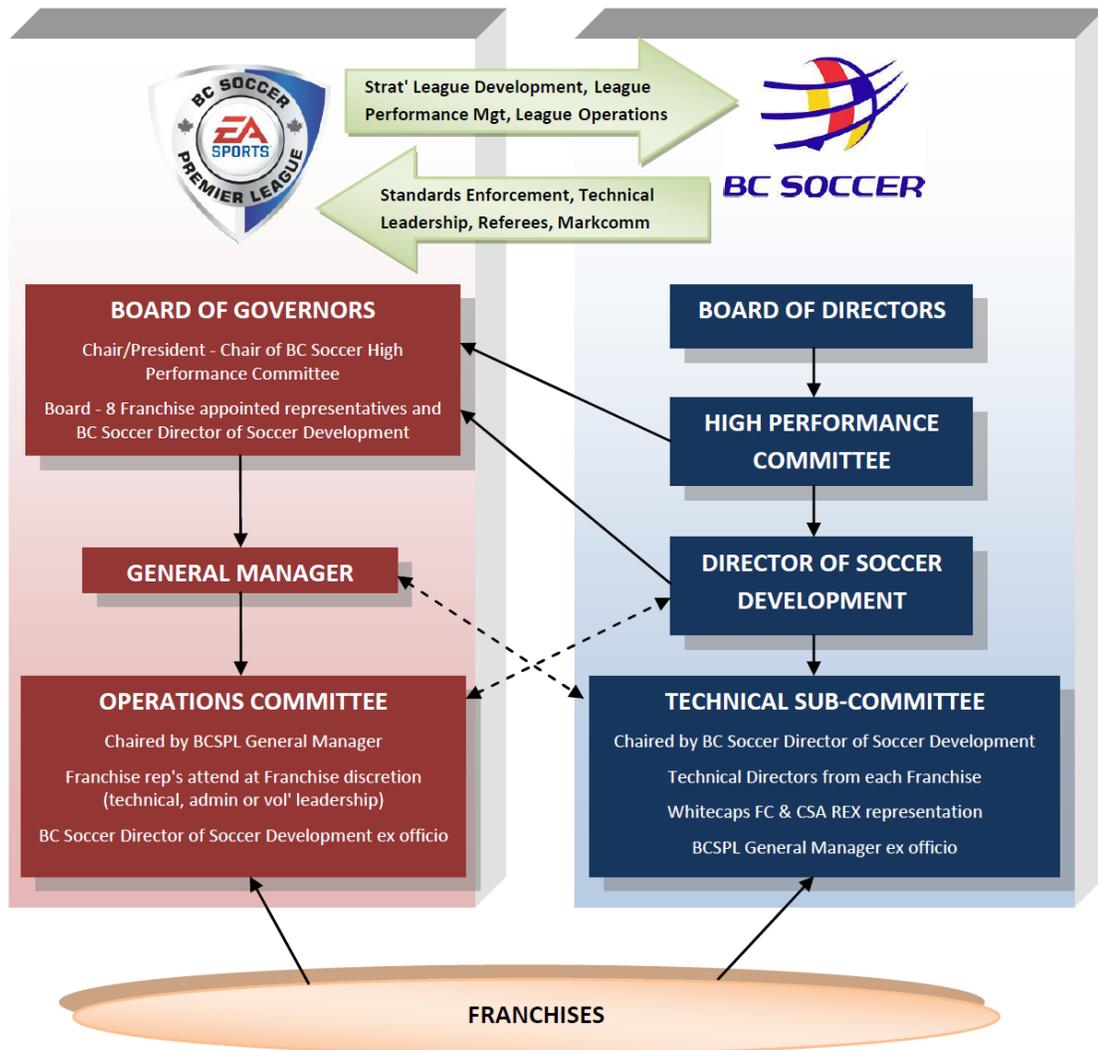
ii. Retain discipline & dispute resolution at Board level:

- as per the BCSPL Discipline Guidelines, this function will likely be enhanced when BCSPL standards are actively enforced and expanded.

**7. Continue to make the surrounding competitive BC soccer system more conducive to the BCSPL**

Finally, in order to be more effective, BC Soccer should continue to strive to create a more player-centric system for BCSPL to operate in. For example, BC Soccer should consider:

- Removal of the BCSPL from cups or competitions that involve any non-BCSPL clubs
- Removal of BCSPL clubs from the competition that derives BC's entry into the Canadian Club Championships



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the BC SPL has pioneered the development of Canadian youth high performance soccer to a club and standards-based model integrated in the club system (rather than solely in the provincial governing body). This has paved the way for the development of other provincial standards-based leagues such as the OPDL and the emerging Prairie High Performance League.

In comparing the BC SPL and OPDL, there are similar and contrasting themes. BC SPL has launched effectively, but some gaps and shortcomings have been identified in its initial three years of operation. OPDL has launched with heightened ambition in terms of its functionality and operational complexity, to the degree that its practical implementation on a fully scaled out basis is still unproven.

BC SPL's primary concerns are focused around the lack of systems of control, that were intended in the League's initial design, but for the large part have not materially transpired. This gap has arisen due largely to confusion in the governance framework of the League as to whose responsibility this function is. It appears that BC Soccer has also assumed a relatively passive role in the governance of the League to date outside of technical matters that have been highly contingent on the leadership ability of the Association's Director of Soccer Development.

Moving forward, both BC Soccer and the Board of Governors of BC SPL must be bold and show strong leadership to keep the League firmly on track as the effective developer of youth high performance talent that it was intended to be. BC Soccer must take a more active role on the Board of Governors and execute the roles of agent of oversight and standards enforcement, and agent of value-adding service support as a priority. In return, BC Soccer should expect strong leadership from the Board of Governors in proactively developing the League on the long term, in line with BC Soccer expectations, and effectively managing the day-to-day affairs of the League through its staff.

Broader systemic changes that may be politically challenging and daunting from a change standpoint, should be considered and implemented to firmly support the BC SPL and endorse it as a primary agent of youth talent development in British Columbia.