

SUMA sector meeting reports

Every year at SUMA's annual convention, the city, town, village and northern sectors are provided the opportunity to meet and discuss various issues and concerns that are affecting urban municipalities within Saskatchewan. Following are summaries of those meetings.

City sector

The city sector meeting was very well-attended, with more than 70 participants from the province's 13 cities. Revenue sharing, infrastructure and environmental issues were the main topics of discussion.

On revenue sharing, the cities again expressed their expectation that the provincial government will fulfill its commitment to establish a new program – linked to provincial own-source revenues – that will provide long term, adequate, predictable funding to municipalities.

On infrastructure, the cities broadly welcomed the Premier's announcement of the Municipal Economic Enhancement Program (MEEP), which entails \$100 million in infrastructure support to municipalities. Cities were particularly impressed that the MEEP would be distributed quickly, without a cumbersome application process and without a cost-sharing requirement from municipalities. Regarding the new \$4 billion federal Infrastructure Stimulus Fund, the cities raised concerns regarding its effectiveness – given its requirement for applications and matching funding from municipalities.

With regard to environmental issues, the redevelopment of abandoned gas stations was a priority item of discussion. One of the major obstacles to gas station redevelopment is the 'polluter pays' principle, where property owners' liabilities are unlimited, risking their exposure to liability claims after their property is reclaimed and sold. The cities agreed to urge the provincial government to begin issuing 'completion certificates' that terminate property owners' liability once a contaminated site has been cleaned up to specific standards.

Municipal recycling programs were also discussed at length, with consensus emerging that the feasibility of all cities' recycling operations are threatened by plunging market prices and high transportation/operating costs.

Town sector

Delegates from the town sector were provided with an update of the many issues that SUMA has been working on over the past year.

Of significant interest to the delegates was the progress being made on the revenue sharing file. Vice-President of Towns, Renaud Bissonnette advised delegates that the Municipal Sector Strategic Plan Tables had submitted a revenue sharing proposal to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs in October 2008. The Ministry has informed SUMA that the proposal has been submitted to the Treasury Board for consideration. Delegates were also advised of the work being done within the MSSP structure to develop a made in Saskatchewan infrastructure program.

The other important item on the agenda was an update on the tangible capital asset reporting project. It was stressed that municipalities must be Public Sector Accounting Board (PSAB) compliant when submitting their 2009 financial statements. Delegates were directed to the www.sasktca.ca website for resources to assist them through the process.

There was also substantial discussion on the membership fee increase being put forward by the SUMA Board of Directors. It was expressed by many that the fee increase maybe too large for some communities to handle. However, following a detailed presentation at the SUMA Annual General Meeting, the SUMA membership voted in favour of the increase.

Delegates also spoke to issues pertaining to recycling, the public safety radio system, school closures and the funding of education from property taxes. Those in attendance were encouraged to review the sector meeting summaries and if they had any questions to contact SUMA's policy and communications staff.

Village Sector

The village sector meeting began with a delegate looking for advice from the group regarding trailer fees. A community was finding that a significant portion of the fee paid to the municipality when a trailer is parked on a lot is going to education, similar to the education portion of property tax. A number of other delegates were able to offer advice to this community by way of bylaw or by charging two fees – a license fee charged at a set amount per square foot and a service fee. By charging two fees, the license fee is fully retained by the municipality and only the service fee is subject to education tax.

Vice-President Barry Gunther chaired the Village Sector meeting and provided a number of updates to files the SUMA administration has been working on including topics such as lobby days, membership fees, PSAB, and recycling. The two hot topics of this update were infrastructure funding and progress made on the revenue sharing front. Many municipalities welcomed the \$100 million infrastructure announcement from the Premier. With so many communities cash-strapped, it was suggested that the municipality's share of this new money could be used towards their one third portion for the next intake of the Building Canada Fund.

Engineering requirements, costs and availability was another hot topic at the Village Sector meeting. Concerns were raised regarding the significant costs incurred to obtain an engineering report. This was noted as a concern, particularly with small projects where the project itself can cost the same or slightly more than having the project approved. Another major engineering concern was the ability to access engineers. With an already short supply of engineers, it is becoming increasingly difficult to have engineers go to small villages that require work on small projects.

Cost and affordability was a recurring topic on many of the issues discussed. Concerns over the affordability of the new public safety radio system - both the radio itself and the monthly fee - will be a significant cost to small villages with limited budgets. It was suggested that the new equipment become eligible under infrastructure funding such as BCF. Another delegate suggested the possibility of the provincial government providing smaller municipalities with subsidies to offset the high power and energy costs of running recreation facilities.

Northern sector

Approximately 45 participants attended the Northern Sector meeting, with representatives from eleven Northern communities and Municipal Affairs present.

Participants were updated on major Northern priority files, such as the MSSP Tables' process and progress, revenue sharing, infrastructure funding, the ongoing environmental regulatory review and the status of Northern highways. Much of the discussion focused on the \$100 million Municipal Economic Enhancement Program (MEEP) announced by the Premier.