

Dialogue with the Ministers

Wednesday, February 4, 2009

SUMA 104th Annual Convention – Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Each year at SUMA's annual convention, delegates have the opportunity to attend open dialogue sessions with provincial cabinet ministers. These sessions allow delegates the opportunity to ask questions regarding areas of concern for their municipalities with ministers responsible for given ministerial portfolios. Following are summaries of these sessions:

I. First Nations & Métis Relations – Honourable June Draude

Minister Draude provided an overview on how her Ministry aims to strengthen relationships between First Nations and non-First Nations people in the spirit of the Treaties, consulting with First Nations and Métis people on provincial legislation and policies that may impact their legal rights and interests.

The Minister also cited the importance of a collaborative approach between First Nations, Métis and northern peoples, other ministries, the federal government, local governments, and business to ensure that those living in northern communities have opportunities to participate in and benefit from economic and social development.

Many of the questions at this session focused on Enterprise Saskatchewan's proposed development of Enterprise Regions, with those in attendance stressing that those living in Saskatchewan's northern communities want to be included as part of the decision-making process on issues related to local economic development. Further concern was expressed that offices for the two regions being proposed for northern Saskatchewan would be in Prince Albert; Minister Draude assured that the offices would not be in Prince Albert.

Because Justice Minister Don Morgan joined Minister Draude, those in attendance were invited to ask questions of Morgan, as well. There were concerns brought forward by some delegates of the ever growing drug trade in Northern Saskatchewan and the impact that it is having on social fabric of their communities. Concerns about an insufficient number of police officers and the need for a Northern Drug Squad that has yet to come to be developed were also reinforced. Minister Morgan said that the Government plans to increase the number of police officers, and also stressed the importance of focusing on drug use prevention. Ministers Draude and Morgan noted that in order to effectively address this issue, a cross-Ministry effort will be required.

II. Tourism, Parks, Culture & Sport – Honourable Christine Tell

Minister Tell began the Dialogue Session with an overview of her Ministry, and said that her department's strategic focus is on tourism enhancement, quality of life and economic growth. The minister noted that there has never been an 'Arts and Culture Policy' in Saskatchewan as a strategic way of distributing arts and culture funds to Saskatchewan communities – a priority for her Ministry. The Minister noted plans to upgrade Saskatchewan parks to 1,000 electrical sites within four years. She also cited the "Culture on the Go" pilot, which will provide access to music and theatre across Saskatchewan, and provide exposure to new artists.

Delegates participating in this session asked many questions of the Minister, most relating to specific projects on a local level. Funding for the museum in Duck Lake, assistance for the Town of Rouleau to create a Corner Gas exhibit for tourists and funding for the Blackstrap Ski Hill were all topics of conversation. One delegate also wondered about a strategic plan for the north. Delegates also expressed concern about the cost of operating sports facilities, and wondered about the possibility of lowering costs associated with power and energy consumption. The Minister noted that many facilities are being retrofitted to be more energy efficient, and also noted that a study is underway to review options.

III. Corrections, Public Safety & Policing – Honourable Darryl Hickie

The Minister was questioned on a range of issues regarding the new provincial public safety radio system, provincial policing, strategies to deal with dangerous criminals and the drug trade in northern Saskatchewan.

Policing was the most discussed item. Attendees requested that the minister provide an answer to lingering irritant of RCMP policing costs for additional duty support and the performance of duties outside of regular policing duties (i.e. prisoner transportation and court guard duties) and staffing shortages at various detachments around the province. The Minister stated that additional duties are being discussed within the scope of the working groups leading up to the negotiations of a new policing contract in 2012, and that he would be speaking with the Minister of Justice on the matter of court duties. Delegates were advised that the province did provide funding for 30 additional officers to be split between municipal and RCMP forces in the 2008/2009 budget. The RCMP portion was directed into priority areas dealing with child exploitation, gangs, major crimes, and to enhance certain detachments responsible for reserve policing.

The issue of dangerous criminals and the work done to monitor these individuals was also addressed. Outside of the recent occurrence in Saskatoon, he assured delegates that the province has a dependable monitoring system. They are also working on enhancing victim services and hiring new prosecutors to deal specifically with drug dealers and organized crime.

Of great interest to those in attendance is the issue of the new provincial emergency radio system that is to be used by the all emergency service providers and is intended to replace the aging FleetNet system. It was stressed to the minister that the proposed costs will be too much for many urban municipalities, including some cities. It was suggested that unless the province offers substantial financial assistance, very few municipalities will participate.

Delegates also addressed the new regulation that affords volunteer firefighters the ability to use emergency lights in personal vehicles and the need for financial assistance to purchase equipment needed to operate an up to date and efficient emergency response service. Delegates were reminded that it is solely up to the municipality if they want to allow their volunteers to use lights. If a municipality chooses to do so, volunteers must attend the appropriate driving classes, which are offered by the ministry, to be qualified to operate their personal vehicle as an emergency vehicle.

IV. Education – Honourable Ken Krawetz

Education Minister Ken Krawetz opened the dialogue session by providing an overview of the current challenges facing the Ministry of Education, including overall declining enrollment in the province, and the growth of Saskatchewan's 'bedroom communities', who are struggling to meet the infrastructure needs associated with additional students. The Minister assured the audience that quality education is a priority for his government.

The top concern amongst the audience was property tax relief, and the Minister was peppered with questions about if relief is coming, and what the timeframe will be. Minister Krawetz said that the government recognizes the urgency of this issue, particularly given that 2010 will be a reassessment year. Although the Minister said that the current market doesn't allow a commitment at this time, the government is well aware of this issue. Minister Krawetz noted that he is in discussions with the Finance Ministry for the current budget.

Other issues raised included: recruiting and retaining teachers in small communities, the heavy tax burden on those owning multiple properties, the size of school boards and the need for local rate payers to have a say when decisions are being made, school closures, capital infrastructure funding

V. Energy and Resources – Honourable Bill Boyd

Minister Bill Boyd opened the session by recapping 2008 in the Energy and Resource sector. 2008 over 2005 showed dramatic improvements in resource land sales indicating an increase in exploration initiatives.

Potash and uranium prospects remain encouraging whereas the forestry industry will continue to face challenges in 2009. Although an upcoming announcement regarding the forestry industry was alluded to, the Minister was choosing his words carefully so as to not divulge any details.

A multitude of questions were asked of the Minister regarding the government's involvement in alternative energy sources, tar sands oil extraction, initiatives pertaining to "rare earth" elements and wildlife protection on crown lands being sold.

The government will be leading a delegation to Asia, China and Japan, to explore interest in sharing technology. Other companies will be joining the delegation as a means to source capital funds for oil and gas exploration. In closure, Minister Boyd indicated that Saskatchewan, although experiencing a slight slowdown that can be directly tied to oil prices, is still in a good position to maximize our resources.

VI. Environment – Honourable Nancy Heppner

The opportunity to ask questions of Environment Minister Heppner generated a lot of interest among SUMA's members; so much interest that a last-minute change of venue was needed to accommodate the nearly 200 participants.

The dialogue focused primarily on recycling. Most municipalities in attendance indicated that market prices for recyclable materials, particularly cardboard and paper, have fallen so severely that local recycling operations are in danger of being scaled back or shutting down completely in the short term. Municipalities re-emphasized the urgent need to establish a Multi-Material Recycling Program (MMRP), to ensure a more equitable distribution of recycling costs and responsibilities across consumers, municipalities and producers. The Minister also heard multiple requests for bridge funding to sustain municipal recycling operations until such time that the MMRP is established.

Minister Heppner confirmed that recycling is a top priority, and indicated that Yorkton MLA Greg Ottenbreit has been appointed as legislative secretary for recycling. Work is currently underway to develop a final MMRP for Saskatchewan. A draft MMRP plan will be ready later this spring. Minister Heppner expressed that her Ministry is currently looking into options for bridge funding to sustain municipal recycling operations. The Minister expressed her interest in exploring innovative solutions to waste management challenges, including cogeneration (burning waste paper and cardboard to generate electricity) and development of local markets for recyclable materials.

Another major issue discussed was abandoned gas stations. Most municipalities in attendance indicated that abandoned or orphaned gas stations occupy valuable local commercial property. Minister Heppner explained that the current review of environmental regulations will extend to hydrocarbon-impacted sites. In particular during the review, the Ministry will consider ways to address concerns related to unlimited liability of gas station owners and possibly to identify incentives for redeveloping such abandoned sites.

VII. Municipal Affairs – Honourable Bill Hutchinson

The Minister provided an update on the Municipal Sector Strategic Plan (MSSP) and confirmed once again his ministry has submitted the recommendations from the MSSP tables, SUMA, SARM and City Mayor Caucus for consideration as part of the 2009-2010 Provincial Budget. The Minister received many thanks from the delegates on the Premier's announcement of the \$100 million in unconditional infrastructure funding. Elected officials also expressed their support for the efficient administrative framework associated with the program.

Elected officials also took the opportunity to express their views on the Federal infrastructure program. Most stated that it is most unfortunate that municipalities have had to rely on provincial infrastructure dollars to assist with their capital expenditures in the absence of a functional Building Canada Fund (BCF) program. The BCF model has not been successful in providing any assistance over the last two construction seasons.

Finally, the Minister answered numerous questions from attendants. Following is a summary of the key answers provided:

- The Saskatchewan Municipal Board sets the borrowing limits of municipalities, and Municipal Affairs is currently aware of the challenges with existing limits. Discussions are taking place to review what can be done.
- On BCF, projects submitted through the first intake are being reviewed by the Federal Government and an announcement is expected in the very near future.
- The Minister's staff confirmed that municipalities can use funds from the Provincial infrastructure program (MEEP) to stack with other programs such as BCF. It was stated though that the main objectives of the program remain to create economic stimulus and to address the infrastructure gap.
- The Waterwolf program is an excellent example of how municipalities can increase capacity by working together.
- Municipal Affairs is aware of the increasing needs at the local level for social housing. Progress is expected in the next few months.

VIII. Highways & Infrastructure – Honourable Wayne Elhard

Always a topic of interest for municipal leaders, Minister Elhard attracted a strong crowd of delegates to this session. The minister began by providing an update on actions and goals of the Ministry, including the nearly 1500 kilometers in improvements made during the past construction year. He also provided an update on the five-year rolling capital plan which was introduced late last fall, a plan that is designed to ensure swift action, and consisting of projects that are solely funded by provincial monies. The Minister also explained how projects are prioritized, and stressed that the prioritization process is designed to be flexible enough to include any emerging projects that might require immediate attention, i.e. for safety concerns. He concluded his comments by stating that his goal is to make the Ministry the best highways ministry in North America, by doing research and testing on new products and materials and through long-term planning.

With the floor opened up to questions, the Minister received several "thank yous" from delegates for funding and repairs to rail and road ways. Despite their appreciation, delegates raised a number of concerns.

Delegates expressed concern over a funding shortfall, and stated that municipalities need the help of the Ministry to help maintain railways. Minister Elhard addressed highway twinning and stated that the twinning of provincial highways will focus on Highway 11 until its completion. The timeframe for completion is eight years, but the Minister is hopeful that this timeframe can be cut in half.

Concerns were also raised over poor road conditions and access to provincial and regional parks. The Minister is working with the Ministry of Tourism to address this issue, and is also willing to consider partnership proposals submitted by municipalities. Safety concerns due to increased traffic volume were also voiced. One delegate was especially concerned that twinning or the addition of turning lanes required a certain level of fatalities.

Finally, the condition of northern roads was raised. The Ministry is well aware of the significant work that needs to be done to the northern highway system, and the Minister said that the government is working to balance the highway infrastructure needs of the north with that of the entire province.