
SUMA Position Statement

As the level of government closest to the people, municipalities have always adapted to deal with challenges of population change, infrastructure development, and changing programming for residents. Increasingly, municipal services are being delivered on a regional basis and resources pooled to give residents access to services, making forced amalgamation unnecessary.

Key Messages

- Municipalities are the most accessible, responsive, and adaptable level of government.
- Municipal autonomy is essential to ensuring that local concerns are considered and the voices of smaller municipalities are heard.
- Many municipalities already partner to deliver services on a regional basis, including shared municipal offices and administrators.
- Checks and balances are already in place to ensure that municipalities are meeting their financial and reporting obligations.
- The forced amalgamation of urban municipalities is unnecessary.
- Local governments have fiduciary and mandated responsibilities which must be met in order to protect private and public interests. When these obligations are no longer being met, a restructuring of operations and governance may be in order.

Current Status

The provincial government is currently looking at the idea of transformational change, which may or may not be applied to urban municipalities.

Background

As of the 2011 census, there were 782 municipalities in Saskatchewan: 462 urban, 296 rural, and 24 northern. This is the second highest number of municipalities of any province in Canada; only Quebec has more, with 1,111 municipalities and a population of 8.3 million inhabitants.

The possibility of reducing the number of Saskatchewan municipalities is discussed periodically, either informally or through focused committees, such as the Task Force on Municipal Legislative Renewal in the late 1990s. Inevitably, the idea of forced amalgamation is too unpalatable for those living in small urban and rural municipalities, and there is little evidence that amalgamation will result in either lower costs or higher levels of service for residents and taxpayers.

Other provinces have moved to decrease the number of municipalities, in part to increase regional cooperation in service delivery, and reduce the cost of providing those services. A variety of means have been used to reduce the number of municipalities, including the implementation of the county system in Alberta, the development of regional municipalities in Nova Scotia, and the forced merging of municipalities to meet minimum population thresholds in Manitoba. These amalgamations have met with varying levels of success. Often, expected cost savings are not realized, as the harmonization of services presents new challenges; amalgamating fire departments, for example, may result in two volunteer departments becoming one paid department, or gaps in service such as increased response times. Expected reductions in administrative overhead are often unrealized, as two lower-paying, part-time positions may well be combined into one full-time, higher paid position. Thresholds, such as population, are likely to exacerbate the struggles of combining service delivery, as decisions are made based on arbitrary numbers, rather than shared needs and capabilities.



Alternatives to forced amalgamation exist, and are already happening in urban Saskatchewan. Requirements for basic municipal functions are present in legislation, and urban municipalities that find themselves unable to meet these requirements may dissolve into their surrounding rural municipality. Between 2005 and 2015, 29 urban municipalities have dissolved. Other municipalities have recognized the potential for shared administrative services, and are meeting both the legislative requirements for reporting and their residents' needs by employing a shared administrator. Still others, have voluntarily cooperated to provide better recreation, drinking water, waste-water management, solid waste management, and fire response services to their taxpayers—when, and if it makes sense.

When municipalities fail to maintain sufficient capacity to access external funding, adopt and enforce local bylaws, or fulfill financial reporting requirements, a dialogue must occur to consider progressive and constructive options, which may include dissolution and amalgamation.

Strategic Context

Recent transformational change initiatives announced by the provincial government have led to speculation that similar transformations could apply to municipalities. Municipal autonomy is essential in preserving local identity and meeting local priorities.

Contacts

Staff Contact:	Sean McEachern	smceachern@suma.org	306-525-4394
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