

Status quo budget short-changes future prosperity



SUMA President Don Schlosser speaks to the media on budget day

“The only positive thing out of this budget is the commitment to review the current revenue sharing arrangement in time for next year. I’m putting the government on notice. We have 12 months to make good on that commitment and deliver true revenue sharing for municipalities in 2006.”

– SUMA President Don Schlosser

“When you short-change municipalities you are short-changing the future prosperity of this province,” said Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities President Don Schlosser in response to the 2005 Provincial Budget.

The Provincial Budget, panned by municipal leaders, contained no new revenue sharing for municipalities.

Schlosser says that while municipalities are disappointed by the status quo approach in this budget, it is really the Province who will ultimately suffer for ignoring the critical need for true revenue sharing in every city, town and village in Saskatchewan.

“There is no doubt in my mind that there’s going to have to be property tax increases in communities now. Municipalities are the economic engines of this province. When you tie the hands of municipalities by ignoring the fiscal pressures they face, you have not only hurt municipalities but you have put

the economic future of the entire province in peril.”

Schlosser points out that it is the provincial and federal governments that benefit the most through economic growth in our communities as they take in 95% of every tax dollar collected – but if fiscal pressures and aging infrastructure prevent

municipalities from creating this growth – everyone loses.

“The only positive thing out of this budget is the commitment to review the current revenue sharing arrangement in time for next year. I’m putting the government on notice. We have 12 months to make good on that commitment and deliver true revenue sharing

2005 BUDGET MUNICIPAL HIGHLIGHTS

- It is a status quo budget for municipalities
- No new funding for revenue sharing. Pool to remain at \$85 million
- Confirms MRIF funding of \$9.2 million (previously announced)
- A total of \$37.8 million on infrastructure (previously announced)
- Commitment to 8% reduction in school tax in 2005 (previously announced)
- Grants in lieu program remains the same at \$5 million
- \$345 thousand additional dollars for SAMA (computer program)
- Commitment to review revenue sharing program for 2006
- Government Relations Department Budget increased by 8.2%
- Overall provincial spending up 7%

Inside this issue

- Executive Director’s Report . . . 2
- Spring regional meeting schedule 2
- Our Members Write 2
- Mosquito management 2
- Revenue sharing futures 3
- New Deal almost done 3
- School tax credits 4
- Parking ticket changes 4
- The Urban Age 5

Quote of the month

“There is no doubt in my mind that there’s going to have to be property tax increases in communities now. Municipalities are the economic engines of this province. When you tie the hands of municipalities by ignoring the fiscal pressures they face, you have not only hurt municipalities but you have put the economic future of the entire province in peril.”

– SUMA President Don Schlosser commenting on the 2005 Provincial Budget

for municipalities in 2006. SUMA will do everything it can to work collaboratively with the Province but by next year’s budget we better have something more than hollow words about building future prosperity,” said Schlosser.

SUMA is committed to working cooperatively with the Province to develop a sustainable and predictable revenue source that would see communities receive an equitable portion of the provincial revenues that are actually generated in municipalities.

Regional cooperation in action

Recently, over 30 towns, villages, RMs and First Nations gathered to sign a memorandum of understanding with the City of Regina to mark a new era in regional cooperation.

The initial idea grew out of a regular meeting of the mayors of Balgonie, White City and Pilot Butte who approached Regina Mayor Pat Fiacco at the 2004 SUMA Convention. Mayor Fiacco thought it was a great idea and committed city administrative support to assist in the ensuing discussions. Interest grew as other communities joined in and words were put on paper which became the Regina Region Inter-Municipal Strategic Co-operation Initiative MOU.

The MOU partners include four First Nations, eight RMs, 18 towns, villages and hamlets and the City of Regina representing over 220,000 people. Their goal is to pool resources and explore opportunities for economic development and efficient deliver of infrastructure services for the benefit of the partners.

Through the creation of a common regional vision, founding communities will be able to work on regional strategic interests and opportunities. Those may include transportation

networks and planning, fire services and emergency response, sewer and water services and regulatory monitoring, landfill and waste management, or regional economic development planning and marketing.

While this example of regional cooperation is certainly the most recent and one of the largest examples to date, the

concept is spreading. It was identified by SUMA’s Strategic Planning exercise last spring as a priority for the association.



Cupar Mayor Val Orb signs the Regina Region Inter-Municipal Strategic Cooperation Initiative MOU

Mayor Fiacco said “This is about a true spirit of co-operation. At the end of the day this is about reducing all of our expenses.” Balgonie Mayor Tim Sterzer added “All the municipalities here have different agendas and issues that face their communities but in most cases we have a lot in common. By working together, sharing ideas and partnering we can make our communities better places to live, work and play.”

Sterzer points out that there is little advantage in a competitive approach between municipalities surrounding a large center.

“Instead of trying to push the elephant, we’re going to ride it,” he said.

Executive Director

The federal government's New Deal will allocate across the country a portion of federal gas tax revenues to municipalities to address their infrastructure needs. In Saskatchewan it is roughly equivalent to 18 dollars per capita for each of the next two years.

To be eligible for funding municipalities must have projects that meet the federal outcome criteria which are currently being described as environmentally sustainable. In addition, the current thinking is that to be eligible for the full amount of per capita funding, projects will likely be required to show some regional benefits that go beyond the immediate boundaries of the community. Now, this requirement may be waived in the first two years to give municipalities time to develop regional projects with their neighbours.

As so often is the case, the devil is in the details, particularly when

trying to define sustainability and regional benefits.

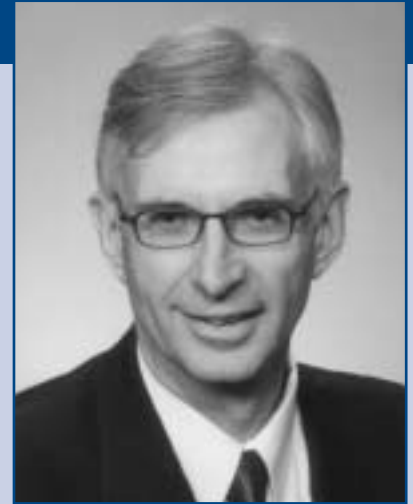
There is an interesting connection between the notion of regional projects and the recent signing of the Regina Region Memorandum Of Understanding. Over 30 towns, villages and hamlets, RMs and First Nations and the city of Regina, agreed in a formal way to look at a way to share resources for the betterment of the signing partners.

This is not of course, an entirely new idea but probably one of the few that has been put down in a formal document. For years the West Central Local Government Committee consisting of towns, villages and RMs with school boards and now health districts has been coming together on a monthly basis to be informed and discuss common concerns and issues. In the past they have shared equipment, taken formal positions on pressing issues and developed discussion papers.

In other parts of the province, some councils have been meeting on an ad hoc basis with their neighbours to do the same thing. The city of Yorkton has been meeting with surrounding rural and urban communities. The bedroom communities north of Saskatoon have been meeting for a few years and formed an association to formalize their arrangements. And there are other such examples.

The point being that in many parts of the province the stage is being set to bring forward infrastructure projects which have regional benefits and would likely qualify for federal New Deal funding.

As the New Deal is being tailored to fit the Saskatchewan context, it is envisaged that every municipality would be entitled to a per capita allocation and could access their full portion for projects like regional water pipelines or regional landfills to mention two likely candidates.



Keith Schneider
SUMA Executive Director

Again, the details have to be worked out so the program has the widest application possible and still meets federal criteria and expectations. Committee work continues to frame the details and hopefully Saskatchewan will be in a position to sign a bilateral agreement with the federal government in the next few months.

Spring 2005 Regional Meetings

DATE	REGION	COMMUNITY	VENUE
Tues., May 10 th	S.W.	Swift Current	Civic Centre
Wed., May 11 th	W.C.	Wilkie	Civic Centre Hall
Thurs., May 12 th	N.W.	Glaslyn	Community Centre
Fri., May 13 th	N.E.	Candle Lake	Recreation Centre
Wed., May 25 th	S.E.	Kipling	Community Centre
Thurs., May 26 th	E.C.	Preeceville	Recreation Centre
Wed., June 22 nd	C.	White City	Community Centre

Please contact your Regional Director for further details.

SUMA mosquito management program

SUMA is currently working on a mosquito control program to benefit the members of your municipality.

With biological control (Bti) having been identified as the most ecological and effective way of reducing nuisance and the risk of West Nile Virus propagation by taking action before the emergence of flying adults; request for proposals are being accepted up to and including April 1st, from companies with the capability of providing our members with product, application and long-term control treatments of local mosquito populations.

Review of these proposals and a final decision on a supplier will take place the first week in April. Members will be advised, via FaxDirect, of the program outline, product line, contact numbers, and all relevant information required to put your mosquito control program in place by the traditional start date of May 1st.

The Mosquito Control Grant Program is again available through Saskatchewan Health; see full details on our SUMA web site – Grant Central Station. Contact Susan Dishaw at (306) 525-4383 for further details.



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Our Members Write

March 10th, 2005

Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association
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Re: RCMP Costs

The Town of Eston has received notice of the cost of RCMP services for the year 2005 and we are pleased to see a further reduction in our costs. Over the past two years we have experienced a reduction equal to one half a mill.

Council wanted to express their appreciation to SUMA and the various staff and committees who worked so long on getting a more fair and equitable allocation of costs.

We often like to make sure everyone knows our problems, but we can fail to make sure we thank those who help solve the problems.

Please pass our thanks to all those involved.

Yours,
Lorne Johnson
Mayor



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New Deal almost done

As discussed at SUMA's recent member education sessions in Regina and Saskatoon on "Grants and Financing," there has been slow but steady progress toward finding a workable distribution for federal fuel tax dollars under the New Deal program for municipalities. (Information has also been posted on SUMA's website.)

While not yet finally approved by the three levels of government, the latest or "sixth" concept version is probably as flexible as can be achieved under federal criteria. Municipalities would receive a per capita allocation with a requirement to use these dollars in one of several infrastructure categories, again largely "green". Eventually—likely starting in the third year—a portion of the funding would also have to meet a

second qualifying test: to generate outcomes seen to have a "regional" benefit.

A key issue will be how terms like "sustainability" and "regional benefit" are defined in practice, as well as in the formal agreements. Also, still to be worked out is how the allocations could be "banked" or borrowed against over several years.

Since the Federal Budget revealed that funding for each of the first two years is to be \$17.7 million for municipalities in this province, some municipal councils have already calculated what almost \$18 per capita would mean for infrastructure in their communities, in addition to other programs like the new MRIF (Municipal Rural Infrastructure Fund) and the one-time Canada Celebrates Saskatchewan (CCS) grants.

Who is the fairest spender of them all?

An SES Research Poll in March asked a random public sample of 200 respondents in Saskatchewan and Manitoba whether the federal, the provincial, or the local municipal government would "spend your tax dollars most fairly."

Municipal government led at 36%, followed closely by the provincial government at 35% with only 17%

opting for the federal government. (A total of 14% said "no difference" or "unsure.")

These numbers were close to the national results, where the margin of error also shows a virtual tie between municipal and provincial governments. Municipalities had a bigger lead in Ontario and British Columbia.

Revenue sharing futures

Those looking for an immediate increase in Revenue Sharing grants this year, like the last three years, were disappointed by the provincial budget. The overall funding level still lags earlier levels of support achieved almost twenty years ago.

What municipalities were left with this year is a provincial commitment to review the Revenue Sharing program in light of the original concepts and commitments. This pledge (in response to convention resolution #1) is even more important than a short-term boost in grants, if it becomes more than the good intentions similarly expressed but largely unfulfilled throughout the last decade.

A working group is being struck for this review, reporting to the Municipal Forum, and it is expected to start work in early April. A commitment to Revenue Sharing

reform in time for next year's provincial budget means there needs to be agreement on principles and program changes by the fall.

Any changes in how Revenue Sharing dollars are distributed may well be the last item of business. The more crucial challenges, if true revenue sharing is to be regained, will be to determine an appropriate overall level of funding and an escalator clause to re-hitch the program to ever-growing provincial tax bases.

At inception, the program was tied to the growth in four tax bases: individual and corporate taxable incomes, fuel tax volumes and consumer purchases subject to provincial sales taxes, but there may be cause to look to other indicators of growth as well. The goal is to try to ensure that both levels of government benefit from revenues generated from economic development.

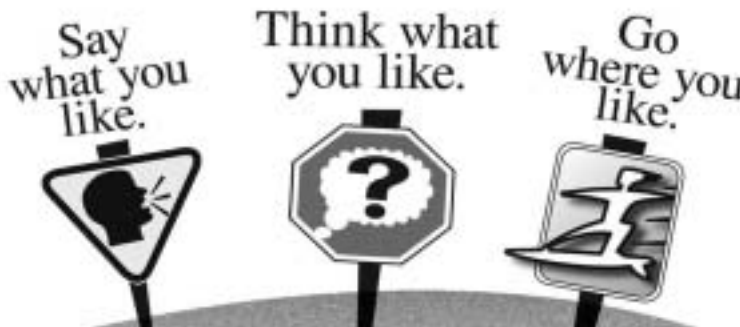
"Provincial and municipal governments, those levels of government closest to delivering services and with whom Canadians have a more direct interaction, were noticeably more likely to be positively viewed by Canadians as spending tax dollars wisely," said SES President Nik Nanos.

It is interesting to note that the level of government most trusted by Canadians to spend tax dollars

wisely is also the recipient of the smallest amount of those dollars.

As SUMA pointed out in its 2003 "Answer the Question" campaign, municipalities only receive about a nickel of every tax dollar paid by Canadians. The provincial and federal governments receive 95 cents.

All the results of the poll can be viewed at www.sesresearch.com.



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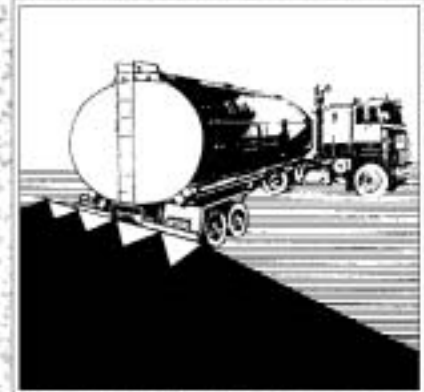
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School tax credits

Both the provincial government and SUMA will be sharing some credit this spring for the 8% school tax credits to be deducted from all local property tax notices (with a \$2,500 credit limit for larger properties). The \$55 million cost in each of two years will still leave the provincial share of school costs the lowest in the land at an average of 45%, but it is a long-overdue step in the right direction. (The Boughen Commission had recommended last year an immediate jump to 60% and an eventual rise to 70% for the provincial share).

Since this provincial funding simply replaces revenues that school boards have been collecting

from property taxpayers, the big question will still be whether any school boards will be forced to cover any further expenditure shortfalls by again hiking local school mill rates. If provincial salary negotiations with teachers cannot successfully hold the line at the 0-1-1% (three-year) public sector guidelines, the Province will either have to find more dollars or see their 45% contribution slip back to a smaller share as local school mill rates again rise.

Municipalities may also find it difficult to hold the line on municipal mill rates this year, given the lack of any Revenue Sharing grant increases, with cities like Regina reportedly facing a

possible 4% tax hike. While this would amount to less than half of the school tax credit on the property tax bill, it would partially deprive taxpayers of overall property tax savings owing to the school tax credit.

The other big issue will be what happens after this two-year funding ends. The dollars were provided only after a one-time readjustment in federal-provincial equalization payments to Saskatchewan. By the end of 2006, the provincial government has hinted that it would prefer to see the credits rolled back into the overall school funding formula. It remains to be seen where the provincial dollars would then come from, either to

simply sustain the 45% level or increase it further.

Information about the administrative workings of the school tax credit is again being communicated to all municipalities by the Government Relations Department, by letter and through recent newsletters. A small part of the program dollars are going to compensate software suppliers for adjusting the systems they supply to municipalities. Small municipalities which do manual tax rolls are also eligible for some compensation for additional labour costs, so those local offices should contact GR to discuss their administrative impacts.



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Parking ticket changes

The Province has finally moved on options for enforcing parking ticket fines. However, the move falls short of what was called for in SUMA Resolution #10 (passed at the 2005 SUMA Convention) and one of the key whereas clauses in that resolution:

Whereas a simple and cost effective solution would be to have SGI add all uncollected fines to drivers' licences or licence plates at the time of renewal, after a mailed note has been sent to the offender and after a certain time period has elapsed.

While rejecting the idea of adding fines to drivers licences, there was some movement to mitigate the expense and inconvenience parking ticket enforcement places on municipalities.

The Province announced legislative changes that will make it possible to mail court summonses and to file a lien again a vehicle.

"Changes to provincial legislation will improve the cities' ability to collect unpaid parking tickets and significantly reduce ticket enforcement costs," Government Relations Minister Len Taylor said.

Legislation will be changed to provide municipalities a number of options to enhance compliance and enforcement of parking offences.

To reduce costs:

- Court summonses may be served by ordinary mail rather than in person; and
- A conviction may be issued in default if the person served with a summons does not appear in court.

To enhance and enforce collection of fines:

- Liens may be filed against vehicles;
- Municipalities may immobilize or impound vehicles;
- In order to ensure that all avenues have been exhausted in extreme cases, a vehicle owner would be personally served with notice of a hearing, and brought before a judge. Only then, would incarceration be an option.

Consultations will take place with municipal stakeholders during the process of developing the details for the legislative amendments. Any changes would come into force once the legislative amendment process is complete.

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Excerpts from Chapter IX of *The New Urban Age*

Expectations were aimed high again in 2004, but several of them never quite achieved lift-off. This fate befell the Toronto based *da Vinci Project*, which had planned to launch its “Wild Fire” rocket in October near Kindersley, Saskatchewan. Competition for the \$10 million Ansari X Prize required riding a rocket into space twice within a two-week period, but the only group to have achieved this feat by year-end was the California based firm of Scaled Composites and their “SpaceShipOne” rocketeers.

The year did start with a bang in the form of a final report from the Boughen Commission on Financing K-12 Education, yet there was more fizzle than forward thrust in the immediate response to the recommendations for school tax relief. SUMA strapped itself into a draft Municipal Act, along with the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (SARM), but the bill failed to get off the legislative launch pad in November. Although the federal New Deal for municipalities had

been promised many times over a two-year period, stakeholders spent most of the year trying to light the fuse. And SUMA’s own Task Force on Regional Waste Recycling started to generate some heat as the year came to a close, partly because too many landfills still continued to smolder across the province.

There were more than a few surprises in 2004. Twice as many municipalities as the year before got geared up to control

mosquitoes, but the West Nile Virus barely made an appearance. Urban Revenue Sharing grants also got a bigger boost than the year before, but they then fell back to a lower priority until the City Mayors’ Caucus again called attention to the shallowness of the pool. And the long wait finally ended for a fairer distribution of RCMP costs among towns, villages and rural municipalities, albeit with a planned three-year phase-in.

Before the year was out, Saskatchewan’s star rose when a favourite former premier, Tommy Douglas, was chosen as “The Greatest Canadian” of all time in a national competition and poll on CBC television. Saskatchewan’s modern-day “Canadian Idol,” Theresa Sokyorka, placed second in the CTV television competition but became a first choice to headline the entertainment for SUMA’s approaching 100th annual convention....

Acre of Dreams

The year 2004 was another leap year, which meant it was again time to consider municipal restructuring, as with the withdrawn Service Districts Act proposal of 1996 and the shelved Garcea Commission reports of 2000. Most of the attention in 2004 was on school division amalgamations, an example of the provincial government’s partial implementation approach to the more comprehensive recommendations of the Boughen Commission. The amalgamation map was set near the end of the year, about the same time that the provincial Action Committee on the Rural Economy (ACRE) started to stir the pot on a regional approach to community infrastructure development.

Government Minister Len Taylor pondered his own vision at a Municipal Forum meeting: “I think regional cooperation is the future of this province. This province was founded on the premise of neighbour helping neighbour. Our neighbourhood is just bigger now.”

Mister Rogers’ Neighbourhood had lost its star the year before, but Minister Taylor’s neighbourhood was alive and well in places like the Sustainable Living Project near the Town of Craik, developed jointly with the rural municipality. Their Eco-centre became a demonstration project for energy conservation and renewable resources, complete with plans to construct an Eco-village of “green friendly” homes and organic production and processing. It also hosted a SUMA regional meeting

Craik Mayor Rod Haugerud had told a policy forum at the SUMA convention earlier in the year that “an investment of \$1,000 in rural development goes a lot further than a \$10,000 investment in urban development.” But not everyone agreed, including an Infrastructure Subcommittee of

ACRE, whose report became subject of sometimes heated public consultations in early December.

The subcommittee’s interim recommendations argued that more public infrastructure should be targeted to a limited number of regional centres which have the best chance of growing because they already possess a “critical mass” of labour and commercial investments. This approach was admittedly contrary to the traditional “equity” principle of helping all communities to

maintain their local public institutions (like schools and hospitals) and hard infrastructure (like municipal roads and water systems). That practice was no longer sustainable because it was not affordable. Decision-making by Crown corporations and government departments was already reflecting the new reality.

The ACRE report said the risk of not targeting scarce public dollars was that “by trying to save every community, we may not save any.” Without the greater “certainty” offered by well-supported regional centres, it was forecast that more people would continue to seek opportunities in Saskatoon or Regina, or out of the province.

Unlike the Garcea Commission reports of 2000, which directly tackled the issue of whether service coordination and planning suffers from too many local governments, the ACRE approach was to deny any interest in restructuring municipalities. But the end game amounted to much the same picture because sustainable infrastructure was crucial to community and council viability....

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Volunteers and municipalities

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What is the volunteerism situation in Saskatchewan? According to the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 42% of Saskatchewan residents donate their time. That's the highest volunteerism percentage in the country but a drop of 5% since 1997. It might not seem like much but for the current volunteers who are already overworked and for the municipalities that they serve, it means the potential loss of activities or services. In almost every province, the volunteer rate has dropped despite the fact that the Canadian population has increased.

In response to this decline, the Government of Canada and members of the Voluntary Sector came together to find ways to reverse the trend. The result was the announcement of a 5 year program called the "Canada Volunteerism Initiative" (CVI). Its objectives are to encourage Canadians to participate in voluntary organizations, to improve the capacity of organizations to benefit from the contributions of volunteers and to enhance the experience of volunteers. The CVI established three centers to oversee the delivery of programs related to volunteerism:

- The Knowledge Development Centre managed by Imagine Canada
- The Information, Building and Awareness Centre managed by Volunteer Canada
- The Community Support Centre managed by Volunteer Canada

The departments of Canadian Heritage and Human Resources Development Canada in partnership oversee the program delivery of the three centres. In addition to these, local networks were developed in each province and territory to help achieve the goals of the CVI organizations. These networks provide the three centers with an understanding of the priorities and needs of each network's region, ensuring that local project proposals and information are fed into the programs administered by the national centers.

Imagine what Saskatchewan communities would be like without the volunteer coaches, rural firefighters, educators, fundraisers, researchers, health/social service providers, emergency crisis workers and all other volunteer work that is given without thought of compensation. Volunteering is deemed a fundamental act of citizenship; in Saskatchewan, it is a way of life. Take the time during National Volunteer Week (April 17-23) to thank the volunteers all around you. Without them, Saskatchewan just wouldn't be Saskatchewan.

For more information, visit www.volunteer.sk.ca or contact Neransra Siharath, CVI coordinator, at 306.751.4762.

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participation of
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