



Upcoming

New North Gathering

November 16, Prince
Albert Coronet

Saskatchewan Association of
Northern Communities

**NEW
NORTH**

This month ..

- Cannabis Legalization
- Revenue Sharing
- Solid Waste "Red Tape Review"
- Monday Night Regina Jazz Group Has Two Members Joining by Conference Call
- Rain Not Sure if it Wants to be Snow

Monthly Newsletter
September 2018

Fed-Provincial Infrastructure Announcement Provides us Something to Put on Front Page

Gathering around heavy earth moving equipment in what looked like someone's back shed, federal and provincial ministers convened to sign a new agreement that gives us something to fill about 8 inches of column space, early October.

The ceremony, which we believed happened at a place that makes or does something with asphalt, brings to an end months of negotiations between the province and the federal government over the terms of the federal government's infrastructure agreement with Saskatchewan, as part of their Investing in Canada Plan.

Significant in the plan is that the federal share of any projects under the northern and rural infrastructure stream has gone from 50% to 60%.

The northern and rural fund is a special carve out similar to the small communities fund from the previous program, available to communities with populations below 5,000 people—that is to say, about 98% of municipalities in Saskatchewan.

Other tranches include funding for greenhouse gas mitigation, cultural and recreational facilities, and northern, rural and remote roads and airports (that one made us sit up take notice, I can tell you). We have all three of those kinds of things.

The total funding package is about \$900 million over 10 years.

No other details of how the pillars will be broken down dollar-wise was made apparent at the time of writing. It was originally planned that an absurdly large portion of the money available through this package would be for city transit capital upgrades and Lego train sets.

Generally speaking, northern municipalities don't directly access any of these federal programs, but are rather brought on board as part of one of the Northern Municipal Trust Account's various funding programs.

The NMTA's Northern Water and Sewer Program (NWS), for example, has been a significant investor in northern municipal water and sewer infrastructure, with phase 4 of the program directing improvements and new builds worth about \$50 million since 2012. The NWS is funded partly by federal and provincial dollars, partly by the NMTA's own revenues, and partly by the recipient municipality.

With the inking of the latest federal agreement, we are hoping that landfills and solid waste facilities, and other critical, usually exempt, northern infrastructure, could be eligible to receive funding, shepherded in some fashion or other by the NMTA. Time will tell.

The last inch of this column space is filled with speculation as to whether the owners of this asphalt place will at some point win a contract connected to the announcement that took place in their very own shed, because irony. ■

NewNorth News & Updates

Northern Administrators Association Gets Ready to “Lean In”

The November Northern Administrators Conference in Prince Albert will be an opportunity for northern administrators to discuss the formation of a new Northern Administrators Association.

The establishment of a northern administrators association has been on the cards for a number of years. The northern administrative capacity needs assessment that took place back in 2010 came up with it as one way of strengthening the professional identity of northern administrators, as well as to

promote the profession in the north more generally.

The needs assessment identified that a more formalized peer support network could benefit northern administrators, who can work in remote and isolated communities and perhaps don't have support they necessarily need. In the last two years, turn-over in northern municipal administrative personnel is running at nearly 50%, much higher than during the previous two years.

Other items on the agenda for the administrators conference will

likely include a pre-audit check in with MNP, and we'll have the usual updates from Northern Municipal Services, and hopefully see how some of the administrative capacity building programs, being led by the NMTA and New North, are working out.

We are also making space available to Government Relations to consult on potential amendments to *The Northern Municipalities Act*, should they be ready to do that.

As always, we welcome any input into the agenda. ■

Minister of Highways Confirmed for November 16 Mayor and Councillor Gathering

Lori Carr, the Minister of Highways since August, will be a special guest at New North Gathering, on November 16 at the Coronet Hotel.

Elected as MLA for Estevan at the last provincial election, Highways and Infrastructure is Lori's first ministerial appointment. Lori has municipal experience, having served on Estevan's city council.

This will be the minister's first chance to check in with northern leaders. We expect to hear some updates on how planning and construction is going on some of the projects announced in the last budget.

Other items on the agenda include a presentation by Workplace Safety on how municipalities can create harassment-free workplaces.

As well, the provincial Ombudsman's office will be along to talk about conflict of interest, as well as some of the ways municipalities can go about better handling complaints from the public (and believe or not, those two things can be related).

The Water Security Agency will also be presenting on the permittee responsibilities for water works, and we will have the usual updates from New North, Northern Municipal Services, and the NMTA. ■

Asset Management Training Opportunities Approaching Terminal Velocity

A few years ago, no one outside of the world financial accounting knew what asset management even was.

Today, almost everyone working in municipal government knows what it is, or at least thinks they do.

This growing awareness is being fed a flurry of asset management training, offered by associations like the RMAA and UMAAS, as well as entities formed especially to grow asset management awareness, such as AssetManagementSK.

The latter group (usually known as simply AM-SK) will be offering a series of webinars and

workshops starting in October to help municipalities get familiar with some of the basic concepts and tools related to asset management.

The webinars are free of charge, go for one hour each, and speak to service level development, risk management, and the development of asset registers as well as long term financial planning.

The workshops go for three days, cost about \$500 each, and have a limited enrolment of about 30 people in each one.

To find out more and register, visit their website: www.assetmanagementsk.ca. ■

From the New North Chair

BY BRUCE FIDLER, MAYOR OF CREIGHTON

The signing of the latest federal-provincial infrastructure agreement was a formality, but what it represents for northern communities is pretty important.

No one is without their infrastructure challenges, but there's always a question mark over these agreements in how they set their priorities, and whether the north ever really fits into them.

We've seen a lot of money going into municipal water and sewer works, and most of the money that comes north goes there as well.

But while that is critical infrastructure and important to spend money on, we also have other needs.

We wonder how long before federal funds make their way into the transport corridors in a big way. Travelling the northern roads, and how they connect not just municipalities, but First Nations as well, it's hard for me to

understand how there isn't more federal money being directed to build and maintain these vital lifelines.

The condition of many parts of highway 155, especially north of Buffalo Narrows, is unbelievably bad. That road serves thousands of people, from dozens of communities. It should never have gotten in that state, and now that it is, it needs to be fixed. It's not just a safety issue, although that's probably our biggest concern. The poor condition of this road, like others, clogs up the arteries of the transport system, not just slowing down the time it takes for goods to get to market, but creating barriers to the movement of goods, and people, to begin with.

Saskatchewan is a province that prides itself on its entrepreneurial spirit. At the same time, that spirit needs more than just air and positive thoughts to help it grow into something.

The state of northern roads has always told a story. The story is that northerners are not worth investing in.

Investing in northern infrastructure is the same as investing in northern people. Then, instead of deficit thinking—where all we think about is why we can't do something—we start to see strength-based thinking. We focus on what we can do, instead of what we can't.

I've said before that I think government sometimes takes advantage of the resilience of northern people. If you know that we can cope with anything that's taken from us, then you take all that you can, knowing we'll survive.

With Cameco and other set backs, it's time for that mindset to change. We deserve investing in, not because we are demanding and wanting a hand-out, but because we know what you'll get back in return. ■

RCMP Investigating Crime-Foiling Potential of Bear-Man Hybrid

More beast than man, and more weaponized central nervous system than either, is how the RCMP is describing what they believe could be the future of crime prevention in the north (*pictured, right*).

Although few people have ever laid eyes on it, the RCMP maintain that the "man-bear" is "180 pounds of raw sinew mashed into the regular shape of a man," but with the reflexes of "we'd say four or five cats," and the courage and wits of 16 ordinary men, which, they added, "would equate him to approximately one female person."

The RCMP have apparently abandoned their earlier plans to introduce a new range of cyborgs, unveiled at the

Northern Justice Symposium in 2015, which were pitched as being more or less the same as regular RCMP members, "just monstrously oversized." The RCMP had problems acclimatizing the cyborg to Saskatchewan conditions, noting that "[we] couldn't get it to stop smiling."

"We think the organic nature of this new crime fighting beast is a step up from our earlier plans for a bio-mechanical unit," the RCMP says.

"At least we think it's organic," they added.

The "powerful new force for good" is said to be just under 6 feet in height, attractively hirsute, "and extremely polite, to the point of deferential, on the phone." ■



All Puns Intended: North Awaits End of Cannabis' Rocky Road to Legalization, End to Rocky Roads Generally

When the federal government announced, in April 2016, that cannabis legislation would be introduced into Parliament by Spring 2017—honouring an election promise—everyone thought they were nuts. The government's own Taskforce and the discussion paper that followed told them to hold their horses. The provinces thought no one would be ready, least of all the provinces.

Still, the Trudeau government pushed on. When the passage of the Cannabis Act appeared to be waylaid by the Senate, many were predicting that this would be the first of many obstacles that might indefinitely delay the legalization of cannabis. No matter, the government ignored the Senate's amendments, and carried on.

In June, Trudeau marked October 17—a Wednesday—on his calendar as the date that recreational cannabis would become officially legal to buy, and here we are.

The Criminal Justice System

Few people have read Bill C-45—the Cannabis Act—and fewer still care about what it says. This is because most of us will not in any way, shape, or form, be affected by cannabis legalization. Ask a 12 year old if she thought broccoli was an illegal substance. If that 12 year is anything like my 12 year old, they'd be fairly confident that it was—or should be. Or, at the very least, not care either way, because they don't eat broccoli. Never have, never will. This is probably how most of us feel about cannabis.

But others, especially those in the legal profession, and many in the police services, are thinking that the Cannabis Act—rather than a decriminalization of cannabis, what we are seeing is actually a *re*criminalizing of it. Why? Because there's now going to be a much greater focus on enforcing a bunch of new laws related

to cannabis that weren't there before. This might seem paradoxical: cannabis, except in certain circumstances, has always been illegal. That's true. But it is now illegal in a new, more circumscribed, and possibly, more punitive way than before. Some in the legal profession think that we are about to experience a cannabis crackdown, not the other way around. Underlying the crackdown is the assumption that cannabis use is about to skyrocket with its easier availability. Rather than slackening off, the police may now be more likely to prosecute kids for possession, because keeping cannabis out of the hands of minors is actually an explicit goal of the legislation (and woe betide anyone caught selling to a minor). Because concerns about youth access have dominated discussions about legalization, it's possible that police services will want to be seen to be aggressively ... policing it.

The same may be true of impaired driving. Those who consume medical cannabis have already raised red flags about being unfairly captured by impairment tests that can't discriminate between the presence of THC in the blood, and actual impairment. They have also expressed similar concerns with respect the likelihood of new and aggressive workplace drug testing regimes—again, based on the assumption of increased usage—that seek to detect and deter impairment at work.

The fact that police services are already clamouring for more enforcement resources may also tell us we are in for a cannabis enforcement bonanza. If so, it'd be going against the trend. Although cannabis has always been illegal, and some say the criminal justice system is bogged down by it, the reality is that police services and prosecutors have over time become less interested in pursuing cannabis offences through the courts. And besides, most people

plead guilty anyway, meaning that the cases have a pretty high clearance rate. In Saskatchewan, over the last five years, the number of incidences of cannabis trafficking, production or sale captured by police statistics have dropped by about two-thirds—from 1000 in 2013 to about 300 in 2017. Possession offences dropped from 1,800 to 900 between 2013 and 2017. In Alberta, it's more or less the same story. In BC, the "cannabis capital" of Canada, the number of adults charged with trafficking offences went from 700 to 250 over that time. You have to be extremely unlucky to be done for possession, too, in BC: 1,700 were charged in 2017, down from 3,300 in 2013.

Local Governments

From the get go, the municipal sector felt neglected in cannabis consultations. The federal government's Taskforce's discussion paper barely even mentions local government, even though it is that level of government where the rubber really hits the road. The provincial government has been a lot better about consulting with municipal stakeholders. Although it became quickly apparent that whatever planning or bylaw-making power municipalities currently have should be sufficient to deal with the production, distribution and consumption of cannabis, the sector still had a lot of outstanding issues. One of them was what to do about tax revenues. The cities providing police services felt that they should be getting a cut to compensate for a bigger policing load, but the province quickly dismissed that idea.

Local governments across Canada have been busy creating new bylaws or amending old ones to accommodate legalization. The RM of Edenwold, home to a spanking new cannabis dispensary that will apparently look like an Apple store, is probably not alone in thinking it doesn't want

anyone in the RM growing their own plants—not even the four allowed by the feds and the province—unless they are doing it for “medicinal purposes.” At the very least, the RM is saving local residents a great deal of aggravation: marijuana is devilishly difficult to grow unless you really know what you’re doing. We’re not sure if this bylaw is actually permissible, but kudos to them for trying.

Some interesting legislative gaps were identified by the provincial government. For example, it was discovered that a loophole exists that exempts farm buildings from codes relating to building standards. The effect of this exemption would be that any codes (such as fire codes) that might apply to cannabis grow-ops wouldn’t apply to those located on farm land and classified as “agricultural buildings.” The province plans to amend the municipalities Acts so that any building, like a greenhouse, that is set up specifically to grow cannabis will be assessed as “commercial/industrial,” and therefore capturable under the National Building Code Canada.

Saskatchewan’s Cannabis Control Act

In addition to the federal government’s cannabis legislation, the province also has an Act, called the Cannabis Control Act. (You can download it by Googling “Saskatchewan Cannabis Control Act.”) The provinces have been placed in charge of deciding non-medical cannabis wholesale distribution, minimum age, distribution, personal possession, personal cultivation, consumption, retail sales, zoning and workplace safety (some of which would fall under municipal jurisdiction as well).

There are some quirks in the provincial Act. For example, it is an offence to possess, use or distribute cannabis in a vehicle. However, if the reason it is in the vehicle is because you are transporting it from a place where it was lawfully purchased, to a place where you lawfully plan to consume or keep it, that’s all right.

The legislation also leaves open the possibility that you won’t be able to consume pot in a camp ground, which seems a bit rough to us.

The province also has a blanket ban on consuming cannabis in public places. Public places include parks, playgrounds, cinemas, outdoor theatres, highways, roads, streets, and thoroughfares.

Another interesting quirk is that you won’t be charged with certain offences in situations where law enforcement personnel discovered something in the course of responding to an emergency. So, for example, if you were smoking pot in a campground (if prohibited), and someone accidentally overdosed on good vibes or whatever, you won’t need to worry about being charged with the pot offence when you called in the authorities. The exemption also applies to others who are at the scene of the emergency when the cops arrive. This section is actually fairly enlightened, and handy for serial good Samaritans who dabble in a bit of trafficking.

The provincial Act sets out a range of fines, with most ranging around \$300. Using cannabis in a vehicle would get you a \$300 fine, and it’s \$200 for consuming in a public place. The larger fines are for anything related to minors, with fines as much as \$2,250 when a permittee (ie, retailer) fails to demand proof of age. Added to that, it’s a \$2,250 fine for permittees when they sell cannabis to a minor. Adults caught smoking pot in a school or childcare facility would cop a \$1,000 fine. Knowingly providing a fake ID to a minor is \$750 fine. Boy, things sure have changed around here.

Cannabis and Municipal Responsibilities

The provincial government has recently released its cannabis guide for municipalities. No, don’t bother looking in there for the latest trends in hybrids and “100 Cannabis Strains You Need to Try TODAY!” because those things obviously got taken out in editing.

Instead, you’ll find a pretty neat summary of what municipalities can

do and cannot do with respect to cannabis regulation. The table that will be of most interest is the one that sets out what exactly each level of government is responsible for, or at least, has the power to make laws about. As mentioned, there is lots of overlap between jurisdictions, but only “public health” and “public education” can fall to all federal, provincial and municipal governments.

And no, RM of Edenwold, it doesn’t look like a municipality can stop anyone from growing the legally permitted number of plants in the privacy of their homes (for private consumption, of course). Nor can municipalities make bylaws stopping people from using cannabis on their own properties. A municipality attempting a bylaw like that would need to justify it terms of the public safety or nuisance heads of power, or somehow through the building code. But, honestly, is that really worth it. Without good justification, these bylaws would likely contravene the Charter, so now you’ve got that to deal with.

Using pot in a “public places” is prohibited under provincial law, but municipalities can knock themselves out passing a public smoking bylaw if they like. No one will say nothing. ■

Long Wait to Buy it Legally in the North

It’s hard to say where exactly you’ll be able to get legal cannabis on October 17, but for sure it won’t be in northern Saskatchewan.

In La Loche, permit owner Flower Power has only just opened up a dialogue with the village, and, as of writing, had barely spent any time in the community.

In La Ronge, the permit owner appears to be focused on their Saskatoon operation, and the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, which got the other northern permit, has so far decided to take a wait and see approach. ■



Municipal Revenue Sharing

Dinner Theatre Concept Works Well in Latest Revenue Sharing Consultations

The review of the MRS program, the latest instalment of which was in

Regina during the month, continues to be an exercise in consensus building, and it seems to be largely working out. Appointed officials gathered around a set of “technical papers” to discuss options for how a new program might look, and while there are some disagreements among stakeholders, no tables were flipped, and no one seemed to be giving anyone a wide berth at the lunch line-up.

Probably Not Many Changes

We mentioned some of the potential program changes in last month’s newsletter. It was mostly speculative then, and I can safely report that its still mostly speculative now. If there are radical changes afoot for the MRS program they haven’t really come out through the review. “Not many changes” would probably be the municipal sector’s preferred outcome, since the program mostly works well. We are hearing that the “same, but more” position is probably not going to cut it, which is fine, because we are kind of tired of saying it.

PST vs GDP

This is a revenue sharing program. The key to it is in the name. The province appears to be open to keeping the link to an index of some sort, which is perhaps the biggest priority for the sector. An index not only underwrites the predictability factor of the program, it also takes the municipal transfer out of the hands of politicians. The reason the municipal sector did so well out of the last program is because of its indexing. What Education would do

for an indexed transfer is probably unprintable.

So what is the linkage likely to be? Do we stick with PST or go with something else? The question is critical because it determines the shape of the program.

The 2007-2017 program had a PST linkage. Starting from about 2009 or so, municipalities got one point of PST, which at its height was about \$270 million. Changes to PST broke the linkage, but there’s no reason it can’t be re-established at a lower ratio, say, point 8 of a point. No one is jumping at our “percentage of value” dumb idea, probably because we keep referring to it as a dumb idea.

The other option that somewhat intrigues us is the GDP linkage. If you have no idea what Saskatchewan’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is, then you are normal. But it could very well become a number that everyone in the municipal sector is suddenly going to be very educated about. And your spouses, let’s not forget them: they’re going to know a lot about Saskatchewan’s GDP in a real hurry.

Saskatchewan’s GDP is reported in a number of different ways. First of all, there is the “real GDP,” not to be mistaken for fake GDP. I’m joking, of course. Real GDP is GDP adjusted for inflation, although it still shouldn’t be mistaken for fake GDP.

Then there is “nominal GDP.” Nominal GDP is just the raw, unadulterated GDP number plucked straight from the numbers tree, or wherever they get these things from. It’s actually StatsCan that does the collation. Is there anything they can’t do? I mean, apart from an accurate census?

Nominal GDP—or Naked GDP (let’s see if *that* catches on)—is always

higher than real GDP because the impacts of inflation aren’t included. Inflation can run anywhere between 2 or 3%, so to get real GDP from nominal GDP you’d adjust downwards by whatever that rate is.

We can’t say what the impact of changing to a GDP linkage would be in terms of the MRS pool’s “quantum” over the next five years. (That would be a quantum leap. Geddit, quantum leap?) In any case, it is being suggested the chief advantage of a GDP index is likely to be that changes in the size of the pool would be less dramatic from year to year—because GDP numbers don’t lurch around like the PST has historically done. The movement would be generally upward, but not by much.

What we *can* do is perform a counter-factual check, asking: what if we’d had the GDP linkage from 2007? What would revenue sharing look like now? If the sector had gone with a GDP (for the sake of argument, at market prices) linkage, revenue sharing would have been at \$183 million in 2016, as against \$271 million with PST as the index. Everything else being equal, the north would be at about \$13 million. And few of us would be here to talk about it.

Looking back, the PST link has been golden. But who can say what the future holds? Now that the sector is happy with the “base” that’s been achieved following crazy sky high PST increases over the last decade (thanks, consumer-led debt binge!), perhaps it makes sense to look at a steady and sustainable revenue growth path going forward? Or not.

The Benefit of Two-year Lag in Indexing

The moans from senior government when revenue sharing increases fell out of line with plunging provincial revenues could be heard from here.

It led to the criticism that the MRS program didn't really reflect the province's capacity to pay for it. Of course, no one in government was complaining when MRS fell in years that provincial revenues grew (this year, as a case in point).

Well, whatever. But little was made of that fact that, to take 2016 as an example, increased spending in the municipal sector, underwritten by MRS, acted counter-cyclically to help the economy achieve a softer landing than otherwise may have been the case.

Unconditional vs "Unconditional"

Revenue sharing, like any government transfer, is not really unconditional. Technically, local governments are supposed to submit their annual audited financial statements or their funding gets yanked.

By "unconditional" government really means they won't step in to tell anyone where to spend it, or make you report on where it went. In the new program that is likely to still be the case, because politically it's a winner, but there could be some additional reporting, or accountability, requirements.

We actually think—and this is perhaps an unrepresentative view—that adding conditions to funding

would work in our favour. It would provide a basis for genuine outcomes reporting, and also ram home how provincial transfers help local governments play their role in fulfilling vital public needs. A case in point: we still really like the way school divisions responded to funding cuts a few budgets ago—they cancelled programs aimed at the kids with learning needs, and then made sure everyone knew why. Sure, it was dirty pool, but effective nonetheless in publicly identifying the link between government funding and educational outcomes. (And to government's credit, under the new premier a lot of those cuts have been reversed.)

We really don't have that kind of metric to play with, other than to point to the existence of any number of northern communities and say "there, all that," of course.

A potential idea could be a requirement that municipalities have, as part of their budget, a revenue policy, where they clearly identify which source of revenue is anticipated to be used for which service (municipalities are already required to make available something similar for their waterworks). This way, local governments could clearly identify, to the public and to the government,

how they are paying—or the source of revenue—for each service they are delivering (user fees, taxes, government transfers). Sure, it has a certain amount of artifice to it, and is open to manipulation, but what metric isn't.

Next Steps

The floor will soon be open to elected officials to have their say on the new revenue sharing program. Here's a hint: don't bother saying "same, but more"—just take it as read.

One thing we'd really like to see coming out of this process—and we are quite serious here—is an agreement with an actual name. So, rather than the "revenue sharing deal" or something like that, it should be called "The Oak Accord," or perhaps, to be more in line with where the province goes with these things, something with "prairie" (like prairie resilience, the name of their climate change strategy) in it. We like "The Danzig Affair," partly because of its hint of occidental mystique, but mainly because we like names that have literally nothing to do with the thing they denote, which again, is something that should appeal to the province. Just kidding. ■

Ten Things We're Most Looking Forward to with the Amendments to *The Northern Municipalities Act* in 2019

New Foreword by Donald J. Trump

A font that literally screams "now!"

22 Previously Unreleased Sub-Sections

Sections arranged in order of importance

The Re-mastering of one Part and two Divisions

Accompanying libretto by Stephen Sondheim, based on Dante's Inferno

Complete cover re-design taking inspiration from Wassily Kandinsky's Holiday Inn Express period

Availability on Vinyl

Some stuff that's probably technically important

Wouldn't it be Funny if the "Red Tape Review" of Solid Waste Regulations led to People Coming Up with More Red Tape?

We don't know how many people stand at the threshold of their landfill and say "boy, what a dump," and then supplement that thought with "I bet it's those regulations!"

Apparently this happens, because the province's new Solid Waste Advisory Committee, not to be confused with the Old Solid Waste Advisory Committee, is out to get rid of the "red tape" that is standing between the dump that you see now, and the dump you'd really like to have.

In all seriousness, the "red tape" review of the 30 year old Municipal Refuse Management Regulations, which is the legislation currently governing landfills, is long overdue. Why this is being characterized as a "red tape" review is a curiosity, but it may have something to do with the premier Scott Moe's election promise to review landfill policies. "The current system of asking towns, villages and RMs to pay significant engineering costs, which are far beyond their financial resources, in order to maintain their permit to operate or to decommission their landfill is simply not working," he said back in October. "We will find a better way forward."

This is welcome news to municipal leaders who've been complaining about the spiralling cost of compliance in recent years, even though, as noted, the regulations are actually more than 30 years old, and compliance costs shouldn't really have changed all that much.

As with a lot of things, Saskatchewan's "settlement patterns" are a contributing factor to our solid waste issues: 90% of municipalities have less than 1000 people in them. This means that about 90% of municipalities in Saskatchewan are probably not big enough to sustain their own landfills.

A small, dispersed population makes finding affordable regional solutions a big challenge.

Saskatchewan has generally met these challenges by not really doing anything. Although residents are spending a lot more to get rid of their garbage—especially if they are part of a regional system—the province as a whole still significantly under-spends the rest of Canada on waste management. Diversion rates are no where near the rest of the country, and in fact, seem to be falling back a bit.

While most jurisdictions have made peace with progressively tougher solid waste regulations, it's been a different story in Saskatchewan. The push-back on new, potentially more stringent, solid waste regulations saw the province shelving the landfill chapter of the new Environment Code a couple of years ago. But the tide can only be held back for so long. Saskatchewan currently doesn't have a target for how many landfills we should have, or any targets for waste diversion. Other jurisdictions have landfill gas (LFG) capture and utilization targets. Some jurisdictions, like Quebec, have targets for organics diversion, and in time it seems inevitable that organics will join cardboard and paper as banned substances at landfills. Nova Scotia and PEI both ban organics at landfills.

So What is this "Review" Really All About?

If you're confused by the mixed messages coming from the premier, welcome to the club. On one hand, it appears the province wants to reduce the number of landfills. On the other, they seem to be baulking at forcing anyone to do anything. To us, we're not sure what options the government really has, or the leeway available to reduce actual red tape, at least in any meaningful way,

especially when the rest of the country is moving in the other direction.

The best we can say is that the province knows that tougher regulations are coming and wants to delay taking the hit for them for as long as possible.

The reality is that the only way to further consolidate Saskatchewan's solid waste system, from this point, is to use a tougher regulatory environment to force local governments to start planning for it. Inevitably, costs will go up—they have to. But the upside is that, in 10 or 15 years, local governments won't have to worry about their dumps anymore, because they won't have any.

The North

Northern leaders, in the meantime, have spotted a once-in-a-generation opportunity to consolidate our generally un-tended landfills into regional systems along the three main transport corridors in northern Saskatchewan. The opportunity is being created by the federal government's desire to see on-reserve waste management facilities moved to the provincial side of the fence (not that there are fences), and are willing to fund anyone with the get-up-and-go to make it happen. The plan would see most northern municipal and on-reserve landfills getting shut and replaced with transfer stations, and the development of a small hand-full of regional landfills to serve them all.

The plan got its first go round back in 2010, but was rejected by northern leaders because it was too costly. Now, however, with the possibility of federal funding, and the realization that someone might be able to make some money out of it, the plan seems suddenly a little more do-able. ■

Media Decides a Review of Municipal Governance is Needed

“It’s time for a widespread review of how Saskatchewan towns, cities and municipalities are being governed,” opined the two city dailies in an editorial published during the month—momentarily forgetting towns and cities are also technically, and practically, as well as actually, municipalities, too.

The editorial piece bases its argument on “some recent situations that point to a lack of basic understanding of the transparency and oversight by elected officials and administrators in these local governments.”

The “situations” include the bridge collapse in RM of Clayton, a mere hours after the mayor had cut the ribbon with a giant pair of scissors (where do they get those from, anyway? A party supplies shop? Michaels?), declaring: “If I am not the greatest mayor to ever rule over this municipality, may this bridge suddenly and mysteriously collapse into the river!”

He didn’t actually say that; I just made that up. Even so, the newspaper thinks this bridge boondoggle raises questions about the “quality of oversight” in its construction. (But the mayor did say, perhaps in the spirit of lighthearted jocularity that can overtake you when you realize that things could have gone very, very differently, that the collapse was an “act of God.” What God has against his bridge is perhaps the more pressing issue.)

Other situations include some alleged misconduct by councillors down in Moose Jaw, and the extreme weirdness going in the RM of McKillop where, among other things, council raised residential property taxes by some horrific amount (remember, it’s an RM) after they misread their financial statements—which is actually perfectly understandable; they are not written to be understood.

These situations all warrant investigation and review, and evidently that is exactly what is happening. Nevertheless, the newspapers believe these events should be viewed as a “wake up call,” and that someone should do something.

As it happens, both the “Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities and Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association [not us, though, thankfully; it pays to be tiny] ... need to call their members to account when it comes to

transparency and governance failures. At the same time, they need to take training on councillors’ responsibilities to their taxpayers to another level.”

They go on to say “government has a key role to play on this issue,” but don’t say what that role could be. Their role could very well be to run like hell in the other direction.

But Seriously, Would a “Review” be A good Idea?

Saskatchewan has about 700 municipalities, which means there are about 4000 elected officials in local government, give or take. The 2017 Ombudsman’s Annual Report says they received 572 complaints from residents aimed at the municipal sector, and 149 were related to council member conduct. Over 50% of those were from an employee or fellow council member.

In other words, about 3% of elected officials get complaints about their conduct, and most of those come from people who work with them—or at least, know them well enough to have become acquainted with their short-comings. The report notes that “in general, we found that we received more complaints about municipalities with small populations ... and those tended to be more serious than the complaints we received about cities.”

Complaints to the Ombudsman concerning local government have increased year over year since they first started taking them back in 2015. This is to be expected. As the role of that office becomes more well known, we can expect the numbers to continue to rise, and then level off.

Do the Numbers Suggest Systemic Issues?

Who can say. There’s an obvious fallacy in identifying a rising trend in reported incidences with a rising trend in actual incidences, and when one visits a SUMA or SARM Convention you don’t exactly feel like you’re stepping into a hive of iniquity. Is more education and training needed? Sure; couldn’t hurt.

The Associations’ Role in Member Reviewing Conduct

Perhaps the most curious line in the editorial is where the municipal associations are “called upon” to “hold their members to account.”

Of course, the municipal associations can exert a certain implicit moral

authority in everything they do. Rarely will you see, at a Convention or Gathering, presentations on “how to bilk your residents: 10 ways to Get Away with Murder.” Instead, you’ll see “12 Ways to Kill Your Community—Lessons from a Pro,” that sort of thing.

But that’s probably not what the editorial is referring to. In point of fact, it is not uncommon in other jurisdictions for municipal associations to play a role in policing the conduct of its members. We see similar types of things being done by professional or umbrella organizations, like the AMA or teachers institutes, which take on the role of regulating their industry and the profession. Self-regulation can work out horribly—the oil industry and pipelines, comes to mind—but mostly industry self-regulation works OK.

Some local government associations in Australia, for example, will from time to time form committees comprised of elected officials to conduct investigations into the ethical conduct of their peers. They can censure their members, and have the power to refer serious matters to the Ombudsman or even the police. (By contrast, here we go straight to Ombudsman or police).

But the local government associations there took those steps following investigations into the sector which shone a very unflattering light on it, revealing widespread ethical violations and deep-seed corruption. Public confidence in the sector—already very low—plummeted.

When the LGAs took on the responsibility of regulating the behaviour of their members, they did it in an attempt to restore public confidence in municipal government. But it’s likely they also did it because they knew that whatever government was going to come up with would’ve been much, much worse, and far more draconian, and perhaps not ultimately in the public’s interest (for example, some senior governments have legislated that annual local tax increases can’t be more than 2%; this is bankrupting municipalities).

We’re not at that point here—no where near it. But if there is one thing that you can take away from the Leader-Post/Star Phoenix editorial it is that the sector is on notice. ■

**From the CEO
MATT HELEY**

When the province closed STC in the 2017 budget they did the unthinkable. Literally. No one thought they would, and then they went and did it. At worst, opposition MLAs perhaps thought that it might be privatized one day. In hindsight, privatization would at least have left something behind. As it is, there is nothing.

What the closure of STC really cleared up was any lingering doubt that government felt it had a role to provide a transportation service. Although we had a government-run bus-line, government seemed to indicate that that shouldn't be interpreted as meaning government felt it had a duty to provide a service like that.

The reason the STC closure left nothing behind—no busses, no business plans, no buildings, no market analysis, nothing that anyone could use to set up their own line—was because to do so would have implied a public policy-driven obligation. This is also the reason there was no hint of what was coming. It wasn't a government service that was being provided; government saw itself, essentially, as propping up

an unprofitable business, one that happened to provide transport.

This was not always how STC was viewed. Chairs of the STC Board, who year after year noted the declining rider-ship but assured everyone that those who did use the service absolutely loved it, would balance their assessment of the economics of the business by reminding us that STC exists “primarily as a service to the people of Saskatchewan” (as one Chair remarked in her Annual Report of 2004).

With respect the subsidy, the CEOs of STC would often note that city transit services got the vast bulk of their operating revenue from taxpayer subsidies—at a higher rate than STC. (In fact, according to CBC, there are only two metropolitan public transport systems in the world that are self-supporting.)

In the wake of STC's closure, we've seen a number of carriers in Saskatchewan come and go, and now Greyhound withdrawing from western Canadian routes. The provincial government's response has been predictable. Rather than wondering how people will get around, they more or less said “see, that proves we made

the right decision!” (Forgotten, of course, is that STC was a partner with Greyhound, bringing passengers from the far-flung parts of the province into the Greyhound network.)

It's an entirely positional response, which serves only to justify their decision to can STC. It does nothing to address the disparities in people's access to transportation.

Had *this* been a concern to government, things might have gone differently. Even the right-wing Frontier Centre for Public Policy (in the news recently because of their comments about residential schools) thought, back in 2013, that the best model for a government bus service was for it to be tendered out to private contractors. They argued that STC should be changed to the Saskatchewan Transport Commission, and be the “purchaser, rather than the provider, of services.”

In other words, the FCPP still thought that government had some kind of role in inter-city public transport. It's a sign of how far we've sunk—or an indication of the approach of an apocalypse—that we agree with the FCPP. ■

About New North ...

Since 1996 New North has been the voice of the municipalities of Northern Saskatchewan. Our goal, as defined by our mission statement, is to advocate, negotiate and initiate improvements in well-being of the residents of the Northern Saskatchewan Administration District. Organized on the basis of strength through unity, New North partners with all northern stakeholders, from government and non-government agencies, associations and First Nations, to enhance the quality of life, create opportunities and build better futures for the people of the north.

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