

Park Bench Has View of Climate Change That May Surprise You

See inside for more



Upcoming

Waterworks

April 10 & 11, Coronet

Saskatchewan Association of
Northern Communities

**NEW
NORTH**

This month ..

- Challenges in Administrative Capacity
- Empowering Our Communities
- Around the Traps
- We rank Saskatchewan's elected officials, from 1 to 2,381

Monthly Newsletter
Dec-Jan 2019

Exotic Destination Wedding Looks Likely as Beaming Govt. Announces Forthcoming Nuptials of EMFS & Wildfire Management

Although rumours about it had been circulating for years, the news that Emergency Management & Fire Safety and the Wildfire Management Branch of the Ministry of Environment would henceforth be living under one roof came as a surprise to many when announced early January.

The Minister of Government Relations, Warren Kaeding, and Environment, Dustin Duncan, teamed up to reveal that following the fire season this year, EMFS and Wildfire Management would co-exist within the newish crown corporation, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency, which also has responsibility for Sask911 emergency dispatching services.

The treasury board crown was created in 2017 to be the accountable government entity for Sask911 following the decision of the City of Prince Albert to get out of providing that service. (Sask911 is managed by CanOps and reports to the Crown.)

In a press release, the government says that the two entities "becoming part of the SPSA will allow for greater internal co-ordination and co-operation, while providing a more streamlined provincial response when emergencies strike. Ultimately this will lead to better service for the people of Saskatchewan."

Government seems particularly mindful of how this change will improve emergency responses and actual fire fighting in the north.

Minister Kaeding pointed to the confusion over who was supposed to be giving the orders to evacuate during wildfire emergencies, particularly in 2015, as a rationale for combining the two services.

"It will certainly ... provide for a more streamlined approach in terms of how government interacts with those northern communities, when it comes to not only to the strategies that have for fighting forest fires, but also the response when we do have emergencies," the minister is reported to have said.

The Minister Responsible for the SPSA is the Minister of Government Relations, meaning that Environment, following this summer, will be completely out of the wildfire game altogether.

Who will be occupying the senior management positions of the SPSA will be sorted out during the year.

The province budgets wildfire expenditures on a 10 year rolling average, around \$50-70 million annually, which will now go to the SPSA.

The merging is not thought to be motivated by a desire to cut costs. However, as a crown corporation, government could be positioning the SPSA to be on the look out for new revenue sources to pay for the services they deliver.

The SPSA will probably also be on the look out for board members.

The registry is at Walmart. ■

NewNorth News & Updates

April 10th & 11th : New North Waterworks Workshops

Lagoons, Wastewater and Microbes to Feature at New North Waterworks

When someone says the word “lagoon” most of us will instantly think of the Brook Shields movie from the 1980s about two teenagers marooned on a tropical island.

Unless you’re a water operator, in which case you’d probably instantly think about some problem at work.

Lagoons are the most common way to treat sewage in Canada. Sewage lagoons work best where mechanical solutions would be too expensive to build and particularly to maintain. Sewage lagoons can cost millions to construct, but once they’re going they can do the job fairly efficiently.

The work of disinfecting whatever is in your sewage lagoon is mainly done by the natural elements (wind, sunlight—the best disinfectant—and time). But that doesn’t mean you can just set it and forget it. From time to time, operators will need to go out to see, among other things, if there’s enough liquid in it. If there isn’t, you could probably count on your operators to add a little.

In the interests of advancing humankind’s understanding of sewage lagoons, long-time partner ATAP’s will this year

focus their 0.6 CEU on “Lagoon Operation and Maintenance” at the New North waterworks in April.

If that wasn’t enough, we have Enviroway’s 0.3 CEU discussing the uses of microbes to solve major problems associated with lift stations, drain lines, lagoons and wastewater treatment plants.

The Water Security Agency will also be presenting their usual updates and what-to-look-out-for. A ground disturbance course may also be available as an alternative 0.6 CEU.

All in all, the New North waterworks offers 1.0 CEU over the two days, which is enough, as long as everyone stays for the whole thing, to cover-off the required continuing education units that operators need to maintain their certification in this province (operators need 1.0 CEU every two years).

Registrations will be open to everyone, and available on New North’s website fairly soon. ■

Empowering Our Communities: March 25-27, Prince Albert Coronet

“Empowering Our Communities” is the name we give to the training and education workshops aimed at building the capacity of Community Consultative Groups, Community Police Boards, and other volunteer-based community justice committees that go under a host of different names in the north.

The most recent “Empowering” event in 2017 was the springboard for the Northern Justice Symposium last year, among other community-led events, which showcased the kinds of things community-driven initiatives are capable of delivering in reducing crime, enhancing community safety, and improving the effectiveness of policing.

The March 25th to 27th event will once again be about getting CPBs, CCGs and others to share their stories, but we’ll also be focusing on some of the new challenges that communities are facing, including the growing presence of gangs, the threat of opioids, and the increase in incidences of violent crime.

2019 marks the 20th anniversary of the original signing of the Community Policing Framework Agreement between the RCMP, the provincial government, and New North on behalf of the northern communities. The framework agreement was the first of

its kind, and introduced a number of key principles that continue to underpin the co-operative relationship between the RCMP and the northern communities today. ■

Mayor & Councillor Gathering: April 25th & 26th

The provincial budget got in the way of our Spring Gathering last year, but we are back on schedule in 2019, with the Mayor and Councillor Gathering set for right after Easter in April, at the usual venue.

A continued focus of the Gatherings nowadays is helping communities navigate the increasing number of governance and administration challenges that officials are facing, as legislation governing municipalities gets tougher, more complicated, and less forgiving.

To this end we are expecting to see some discussion around *The Northern Municipalities Act* amendments, which are likely to be going through the Legislative Assembly sometime this year.

Look out for more information about who’s coming and who has a dental appointment they just can’t get out of, in the next newsletter.

As always, if there are any agenda items you’d like us to specifically include, let us know. ■

From the New North Chair

BY BRUCE FIDLER, MAYOR OF CREIGHTON

I was once again privileged to visit with some of our councils over the last month to listen and observe and get a sense of the issues that are top of mind of some of our community leaders.

What I found is that everyone has a lot on the go right now. No one seems to be standing still. The feeling, at least in the communities I visited, is one of positivity.

Some councils are growing a little more aware that the next elections are under two years away (we did have to confirm in a couple of cases that, yes, the elections are in 2020!).

I was especially impressed with the fact that councils were thinking not in terms of whether they will be re-elected or not, but in terms of what kind of issues, or legacy, they might be handing onto the next group that comes in. I believe that they are thinking about what it means to leave the community in better shape than it was in 2016.

I honestly believe that anyone who achieves this will have done a great thing. This has not been, and will not be, an easy term of office for any municipal council to have endured. If you look back at the last two years, it's been a time of sagging revenues and growing obligations. If you came into office in 2012, you'd have seen revenue sharing grow from \$17 million to about \$20 million in a single year. Could you imagine your revenue jumping by 20-30% in a single year? That happened.

However, if you came into office in 2016, you'd have faced two years of falls, by about the same amount. We

Free 10 Minute Trainers Can Help Improve Your Citizen Service

The Ministry of Government Relations reminds municipalities to take advantage of 10 Minute Trainers – a free online training tool to help expand the knowledge of councillors and administrators.

The 10 Minute Trainers include short videos and questions designed to engage municipalities in discussions about local issues. The informative training, which can be facilitated by administration, can be easily completed as a group before or after a council meeting to be efficient with busy schedules.

The first 10 Minute Trainers module online is about council procedures bylaws. It focuses on

had a lot of brand new councils come in 2016. Their task has been one of “managing the decline,” which means trying to keep all the municipal services, staff levels and so on, operating at peak levels, with less and less money each year to do that. To say that this term in office has been a baptism by fire for newly elected would be an understatement.

And all this without mentioning the broader impacts of job losses in mining, impacts which are spreading through our northern economy.

So to see northern municipal leaders taking all this in their stride is warming to the heart, and fills me with great optimism. If they can get through this period when things are tough, then how much better positioned will they be when conditions improve?

SUMA Convention

I'm looking forward to seeing all northern leaders at this year's SUMA Convention in Saskatoon.

The New North Executive will, as we do every year, sit down with the SUMA Board to talk about common issues and the things we can work on together over the next 12 months. SUMA continues to be a great advocate for northern communities, and a great support for New North as well.

And when you're at SUMA don't forget to take advantage of the Dialogue with Ministers sessions on Wednesday morning. ■

everything from special meetings and the minimum numbers of council members required for a vote to pass, to dealing with delegations and committees.

Ten Minute Trainers can be found at: www.saskatchewan.ca/government/municipal-administration/training-workshops-and-advisory-services-for-municipalities/training-for-municipal-council.

For more information, contact the Ministry of Government Relations at 306-787-4984 or Amanda.Willcox@gov.sk.ca. ■

Cumberland House Making Big Moves

BY Chelsea Laskowski **S**ome locals in Cumberland House are bringing a 24-hour child crisis centre to the community.

They will provide emergency shelter for children whose parents have addictions and other social struggles that could lead to apprehensions through social services. It should open within the year.

“A lot of times our children are taken away from the community. This is the way we want to prevent that from happening so the children stay in Cumberland but we also want to find a way to alleviate that problem” by supporting families, said town councillor Veronica Favel.

The new centre, which they are calling a children’s haven, is based off the model at Prince Albert Children’s Haven. The Cumberland House project is one of many being pursued by a subsection of the Metis Nation of Saskatchewan called Filles De Madeleine Metis Women’s Group. Favel is the secretary for the local chapter of the women’s group, and Denise McKenzie is the president.

“We always hear that it takes a village to raise a child and I think this is where [the children’s haven] stems from,” Favel said.

Local people will be trained and employed at the haven, and McKenzie envisions the community someday training its own social workers or counselors.

“We’re doing these things for ourselves and it does give us a lot, it empowers ourselves,” McKenzie said.

They don’t know yet how many people they’ll be able to house, or whether they’ll have to buy a building themselves. Mayor Kelvin McKay is seeking the donation of SaskHousing unit from the province for the project that would la

McKay is cautious — he said doesn’t want to encourage negligent parenting practices in a community that he says is already set up with high social assistance that sticks people in a rut of not seeking meaningful employment. At the end of the day, the result is that people are not self-motivated to seek a better life for them and their families, he said, which is a disheartening thing.

However, at the end of the day, the safety of the kids is most important and he is mostly supportive of it.

Beyond the haven, McKenzie and Favel are eager to set up a thrift shop in town, with plans to open by this summer. They note that there’s no clothing stores there, and would love to make a workshop area for mending, alterations and making blankets and other things. They’ve already starting gathering donations, but need a building set up.

They are also involved in developing a museum for the community that will bank on its natural beauty and include tours with Elders. Youths in the community are already gathering oral history from Elders.

They met with the Saskatchewan Heritage Society late in the month, but are already gearing towards making interpretive trails for an “eco museum” rather than the traditional museum setup.

Life in plastic, not so fantastic

Lac La Ronge Regional Waste Management Authority has done away with recycling plastic, effective January 1. This means plastic bags, yogurt containers, bottle caps, disposable cutlery and all hard plastics are destined for the trash now.

The last plastic shipment before it all shut down went out in November.

Why? Turns out, recyclable plastics aren’t as marketable as they once were. Things took a turn in 2018, when Lac La Ronge had to pay money to ship off their plastics, said Betty Hutchinson. At first, the tin cans, paper and cardboard recyclables were subsidizing that cost but for the last few months of 2018 they were operating at a loss.

Even then, Hutchinson said the recyclables that go from La Ronge could be dumped in China instead of actually being recycled.

“It was frustrating for me that we would be shipping goods that people had in all good conscience carefully saved and we had sorted and baled and niggling in back of mind that nothing good is ever coming of them,” she said.

“The bottom line is that there is no market for plastics that we could be sure they are being used properly.”

The Lac La Ronge authority is the only operation in New North’s region that collects, sorts and hauls recycling and serves between 8 to 10,000 people. Hutchinson defends the choice to end plastic recycling, especially since she said a lot of plastic was already ending up in the landfill, either because people didn’t sort it or because it was too dirty to be recycled.

Much of the plastic recyclables were coming from business, not personal use, Hutchinson said.

She notes that “recycle” is low on the list of the 3 R’s — reduce, reuse, recycle — and said so far people have been compliant with not throwing plastic in with their other recyclables.

Solar catching on

Denare Beach is looking to set up a field of ground-mounted solar panels to offset the power cost of its administration building, fire hall and the Denareplex. The project is nearly three times bigger than Green Lake’s.

It’s not a sure thing though: mayor Carl Lentowicz says while some on council are pretty bubbly about the project, “I like to keep my feet on the ground a little more.”



The Mayor of Cumberland House, Kelvin McKay (left), is joined by New North Chair and Mayor of Creighton Bruce Fidler, and Cumberland House Councillors Elaine Crate, Ferlin McKay and Alan Bishoff.

The project is expected to go ahead by the summer as long as Denare Beach gets enough grant money to make a reasonable return on investment. For councillor Frank Wiegiers, that would mean that within 10 to 12 years, the savings on their SaskPower bills will have paid back the money they put into it.

Both Wiegiers and Lentowicz are a bit put out that many big green energy grants available have deadlines that keep them from waiting until solar panel technology advances enough that Denare Beach could get ones with batteries that would allow them to store power that can be used, say, in the event of a power outage. But there's a big advantage right now too — solar panels are 30 per cent cheaper to buy now than they were when Green Lake first dipped its toes in the solar waters, says Green Lake administrator Tina Rasmussen.

So far Green Lake has found the panels make it nearly free to power the arena and community hall in the summer. In the winter they have to pay about half of the power bill—

the most they've paid for those buildings is around \$600 per month, Rasmussen says.

Denare Beach's initial call for proposals came back with bids around \$300,000 but in the end the village got an offer much lower than that from Aurora Renewables, a consortium of English River First Nation-owned company Tron and Primary Engineering that has been bulk buying solar panels and was able to pass on some of its savings in its bid.

The north has a lot going for it right now because solar companies are now eager to work with northern communities, which means companies are now competing with each other to get their business, says Bryan Gray of Saskatoon consultancy Urban Systems, who worked on Denare Beach's feasibility study and call for proposals.

"Communities are in the driver's seat to be dictating their needs to these different vendors," Gray said. ■

Why Does No One Want to Pay for Libraries?

The provincial government has just wrapped up the public consultation phase of their review of the provincial library system, which came after the release of the report of their engagement with library stakeholders during December.

The province had a short survey up on their website until January 25th, where people were invited to give feedback on the report, and perhaps own up to any overdue library books.

Seriously, though, many people, including library stakeholders, are understandably confused about why the province is engaging in this process to begin with, with some suggesting that it is a precursor to a budget announcement that will once again cut library funding, but for keeps this time. The decision to cut funding in the 2017 provincial budget was reversed after a vehement, well-organized show of support from the reading public, which included read-ins at the offices of local MLAs and led to a massive spike in the sales of Patricia Cornwall.

Even the Premier Brad Wall said it was a bad decision, one of the worst of his premiership, so it's hard to see government going in that direction again, unless they have a plan, perhaps one influenced by an early Robert Ludlum.

Right now, the province provides about 37% of the funding needed by regional libraries, 3% for municipal libraries (ie, Saskatoon, Regina) and 87% of the funding for the northern library system (almost \$1 million a year).

When the province cut library funding, they eliminated 100% of their \$1.3 million in funding to the municipal system, and \$3.5 million, or 57%, of their funding to the regional system. The northern system was untouched.

Chances are that if the province cuts their share of funding the municipal sector, which already supplies most of the funding, will have to fill the gap, or take the responsibility for shutting doors.

There doesn't seem to be any rationale for government to want to get out of library funding, other than it just doesn't feel it should be a provincial responsibility anymore.

We suspect there will be some very pointed questions about government's intentions at SUMA Convention. Get your Jane Austen's ready: this could get droll. ■

Northern Municipal Administrative Challenges (Probably) Won't Fix Themselves

BY MATT HELEY*

The next couple of years may bring renewed and vigorous activity to address the long-standing gaps and challenges that have be-devilled northern municipal administrative capacity for decades. No one likes the current situation—not leaders, residents and senior governments—but the desire to tackle the underlying issues has rarely been matched by the will—and perhaps, until recently, the necessity.

What is going to be driving the necessity for “municipal compliance” is the same thing that is currently driving it—the linkage to funding—but with the added twist that government, with the new revenue sharing deal, may actually begin to hold back or re-direct funding for non-compliant communities, rather than just amuse themselves with the thought of doing it. This was a major talking point during the revenue sharing review through 2018.

Current State

Northern municipal governments have a whole pile of things that they are legislatively required to do. The list is endless and growing, relating to landfills, potable water, libraries, fire protection, policing, cemeteries, streets and roads, emergency planning, building standards, and so on. And then there are lots of things they can do if they feel they want to (housing, animal control, health care, etc). If they choose to do those things they need to observe the legislation governing those activities.

When we talk about municipal legislative compliance, however, we are really only talking about compliance with the legislation under which northern municipalities are incorporated, *The Northern Municipalities Act* (and one or two others), and even then, with only a few key sections. These key sections form the basis of the “compliance indicators” that we use to see how well a municipality is going. A municipality’s organizational health, of course, cannot really be summed-up by reference to a few indicators—a community can be compliant but still make horrible decisions; likewise, a community can be non-compliant but be otherwise quite well run (and then there are communities transitioning from one state to the other).

Even so, while recognizing that compliance indicators are only superficial barometers of organizational health, they do give us something to work with. Let’s take perhaps the most important compliance indicator:

the preparation and submission of annual financial statements.

In 2010, only 7 northern municipalities (28%) submitted financial statements to government before the June 30 deadline, a number which dropped to 3 in 2009 (13%). By December 2009, 15 municipalities had yet to submit their 2008 statements (one reason identified for the very late submission of 2009 fiscal year statements was changes to accounting standards for municipal governments from that year).

Compare that to now: by October 2018, 12 communities had submitted their 2017 financial statements—a little over 50%, with a further 5 communities likely to submit their 2017 audited financial statements by the end 2018. While that’s an improvement from 2009 (although about the same as in

Examples of Compliance Indicators

- UMAAS certified Administrator where required
- Financial Statement Submitted by June 30
- Assessment Role Confirmed
- Council Procedures Bylaw Passed
- Elected Officials Annual Mandatory Public Disclosure Statement Lodged with Administrator

2008), the more troubling indicator remains how many communities are not able to submit audited financial statements with an “unqualified” opinion. Less than 50% of northern municipalities have clean audits—that is, assessments where the auditor is reasonably confident that the books they audited are a fair representation of what is really going on. While more communities are getting their books audited, there doesn’t appear to be much of an improvement in the “quality” of the audits over the last decade. (To be clear, audits with a “qualified” opinion don’t necessarily indicate malfeasance or fraud or anything like that is going on).

While submitting audited financial statements is just one indicator, it is an indicator that can, ah, indicate quite a lot about a municipality’s administrative

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capacity, or lack of. It is the one we take the most notice of for a reason.

The Costs of Non-Compliance

Paradoxically, it has for some time made more financial sense for communities to remain non-compliant rather than pouring money into the fruitless effort to try to achieve compliance. Let's take financial audits: because the auditor is quite often involved in accounting activities in the preparation of the financial statements they are to audit (which is actually a contravention of auditing principles), the costs of an audit to communities can be very high. It is not unusual to see small communities paying \$40,000 for an audit (the average should be around \$12,000). One northern community spent more than \$250,000 to bring their books up to speed over a short couple of years. The kick in the teeth, of course, is when after all that expense their audit comes back with a qualified or denied opinion.

Balance that against the loss of grants and other funds due to non-compliance. Northern municipal non-compliance with the federal Gas Tax Program costs northern municipalities about \$300,000 a year in capital funding, but for most of the northern hamlets—which would get on average a few thousand dollars a year from it were they participating—the combined loss is only about \$50,000.

The five-year northern capital grants program finished its last run with quite a number of communities not accessing their share because of compliance issues. However, that money won't be lost to them: unspent funds are being rolled into the new program (of course, they will eventually need to become compliant to get their dough for new graders and such).

This picture is likely to change. Government has historically been very reluctant to penalize non-compliance by withholding revenue sharing in the north—because of the enormous mess that would create—but the new MRS deal is possibly to come with a compliance requirement that will be very difficult for government to wield with any kind of discretion. While we don't specifically know what that compliance requirement might be, the biggest costs to northern municipalities will probably not mainly be felt in financial terms (because municipalities need to keep paying their staff, their insurance, the bills for water and sewer, etc, government can't completely switch off the funding). Rather, it will perhaps mainly be felt in a loss of, or restrictions on, the autonomy of communities to make their own financial decisions.

Whence the Capacity Challenges?

The *Northern Municipal Administrative Capacity Needs Assessment* prepared by the U of S in 2010 identified the capacity challenges of the northern municipalities as stemming from “recruitment difficulties, professional

isolation, a lack of supervisory capacity for financial management among Councils and a decrease in the capacity of Northern Municipal Services Branch to provide support, training and inspection.”

In other words, just about everything you can think of. The one we tend to focus is the recruitment and retention of certified, experienced staff. Northern municipalities experience astonishing levels of turn-over in key administrative positions. More than 100 people have occupied the roles of administrator (clerk) and the assistant positions across the 24 incorporated municipalities since 2008. Right now, 14 communities have an administrator or clerk who were not in those roles in 2015. A number of communities have gone through 2 or 3 administrators since then. Of course, the recruitment and retention of staff is not simply an issue in northern municipal administration; it's an issue that can be seen in many fields, including healthcare, education and other areas of public administration (including senior government).

And then there is training and certification. It is a requirement that municipalities have a certified administrator, but the reality is that very few northern municipalities have staff certified according to the standards set by UMAAS, and perhaps will never have. If an administrator does not already come to a community with their UMAAS certification it is virtually impossible for them to obtain the hours of supervision they need (basically, one full year) to become certified while working in a northern community, simply because the access to a qualified mentor is not available.

Possible Solutions

1. More Focus on Succession Planning
2. Regional Delivery of Financial Services
3. Administrative “Circuit Rider” Program

Succession Planning/Internships

Succession planning means having a strategy in place to groom lower level employees to move into more senior roles if and when they open up with retirements and regular staff attrition. Some northern municipalities invest just as heavily, in terms of training and education, into their junior-level staff as they do their senior staff.

Succession planning can be difficult in small municipalities, but not impossible. An internship program has been floated as a possible solution to recruitment issues, but has never been given serious consideration. It is thought municipalities would just use internship funding to supplement wages of existing positions.

Regionalization of Financial Services

A recommendation of the 2010 study was the development of shared resources, particularly for

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financial accounting. This recommendation is not to be equated with the amalgamation of municipal administrations, which is a complete non-starter. Rather, the recommendation was for municipalities to join together regionally to share a single financial management resource, someone with expertise in Simply Accounting or Munisoft, to maintain the books, establish accounting and internal control systems (and write checks), and generate year-end financial statements. Many CBOs (like New North) use external bookkeepers, and it works pretty well.

Administrative Circuit Rider Program

We all know what ATAP's Water and Wastewater Circuit Rider program is, and how successful it is. Essentially, each municipal waterworks and treatment plant is visited about twice a year by experienced operators who do on-the-job and hands-on training with the plant operators, advise on maintenance, and generally keep an eye on things.

It is fully funded, at a cost of about \$500,000 a year, by the NMTA.

For years, northern leaders have been advocating for a similar program for municipal administration.

A program like this operates in the US state of Maryland, although there the circuit rider has a much greater role in the running of the municipality's administration than the ATAP circuit rider does with respect to waterworks here.

In Maryland, the circuit rider's duties can be tailored to each community they serve, and can include responsibilities for financial management (and the preparation of financial statements), grant writing, doing taxes and preparing the assessment role. The circuit rider exists to supplement the skill-set of the existing CAO (if they have one), provide mentoring to inexperienced staff where the existing capacity doesn't exist, and "onboarding" of new staff in the event of unexpected departures (pretty common here).

The interesting thing about the Maryland is that it is funded via a grant contribution that covers 90% of the cost of the service, which communities have to apply for. A key criteria is that three or more communities have to apply as one, sharing that other 10%, which not only ensures buy-in, but also potentially creates the framework for the regionalization of additional services.

Who Should Pay for Support Programs?

Back in 2010, the U of S needs assessment estimated that the total cost of the supports they thought the northern municipalities needed to get themselves in shape would be \$920,000 annually. This included:

- Shared Financial Resource – \$250,000

- Website Development – \$40,000
- Hiring more northern advisors – \$300,000
- Succession Funding – \$100,000
- Funding for Internships – \$240,000

It was a big pill for anyone to swallow, and not surprisingly, none of those programs got going.

But here's the thing: in 2010, revenue sharing was about \$12 million. Within a year or two, it will likely be up around \$20 million.

Last year, the amount of money distributed through the "General Government" pillar of revenue sharing (which, among many other things, has an allowance for paying administrative staff), was almost \$9 million by itself.

Does any of that add up to having enough money to put in place the appropriate structural arrangements to support building administrative capacity? Who knows. It seems like there is always something else more important that needs to be done (landfills, water and sewer infrastructure, etc).

The issue really is that the capacity challenges are not equally felt, and so therefore, collective responses create "free riders" – someone getting the benefit of something without contributing proportionately to its cost.

You sometimes hear northern leaders question why they should contribute to a collective effort to fund a program where it is known there will be a disproportionate and inverse relation between those communities mostly benefiting from the program, and those communities mostly funding it. It's a fair and reasonable thing to ask.

Traditionally, in public policy, the way out of this conundrum is for government to step in and make a determination. That's why the NMTA funds the ATAP circuit rider program (the NMTA is mostly comprised of government revenue), among others.

A permanent carve-off from northern revenue sharing of about 2% (\$400,000, at \$20 million) would, potentially, create the basis for a program to permanently supplement northern municipal capacity, whether through the creation of a shared financial resource, a circuit rider-type service, or some hybrid of those.

We already know the collective financial cost of communities not meeting compliance. Optimally, the carve-off would pay for itself over time, but that's really only part of why any of this matters. To paraphrase that well-known commercial: the cost of northern municipal capacity building wishlist: \$400,000. Having healthy, well-governed northern communities ... ? ■

****Views expressed are those of author***

Recent Rotten Weather & Background as Municipal Official Suitable Preparation for SUMA Convention 2019

The arrival of arctic weather in northern Saskatchewan is generally thought to have the benefit of preparing everyone for the even worse weather that's always only just around the corner. And that is virtually guaranteed to be guaranteed, if history is any guide, to coincide with SUMA's Annual Convention, starting at the beginning of February in Saskatoon.

This year's theme is "Hometown Advantage," and many of the presentations have appropriately sport-related titles. We have "Girls in the Game" (about women in politics), "Shut Out Crime in Your Community" (crime reduction strategies), and "Equip Your Community with Solid Waste Management" (how to choose drapes that are right for your living room).

"Get You in on the Ground Floor"

Historically, the premier has used his address on the first day of Convention to tell everyone about his latest multi-level marketing scheme. Last time it was essential oils.

But seriously, typically the premier's address provides some kind of signal as to government's current direction and their plans for the future. For instance, a few years ago Brad Wall pre-announced that they'd be running a budget deficit rather than go down an austerity path (although the next year, ahead of a brutal budget, he argued for the re-definition of "austerity"). Last year's address by Scott Moe was his first real public outing as premier. This year, we expect to see Premier Moe presenting a disquisition on his vision for the province, with perhaps a brief sally into the carbon tax fight with the feds.

We're joking, of course; it'll for sure just be about the carbon tax.

Revenue Sharing

We also expect to see an announcement on revenue sharing.

Resolutions Session

The resolutions session is our favourite part of Convention because you get to hear some real debate. SUMA facilitates the session very tightly, having a few years ago introduced a one minute time limit for speakers, at the expiry of which the mic goes dead, the lights go down, and any infringing delegate is hauled off to be made Donald Trump's press secretary.

Municipalities will sometimes use the resolution session to put "big issues" on the stage, like climate change or pipeline capacity (no contradiction there). This year the resolutions are more modest in scope, but no less interesting for that.

The Town of La Ronge is advancing the resolution that an additional 5% tax be placed on alcohol sales by the province with the proceeds to go back to the community whence the sales originated. A similar resolution was put up at a New North AGM a few years ago, and it received overwhelming support. But that doesn't mean issues weren't identified (one of them being what do about situations where a liquor store serves more than one community: should the tax revenues be somehow divided up amongst them?).

The bigger issue here is that if communities felt that the province was adequately resourcing public safety and wellness programs to ameliorate the impact of addictions they wouldn't need to be putting up their own initiatives, and seeking funding for them, in the first place.

Another tax-related resolution comes jointly (no pun intended) from the Town of Aberdeen and the SUMA Board of Directors, and is about why proceeds from the cannabis excise tax are not coming back to municipalities. Again, this resolution seems fairly cut and dried (anyone?). For reasons of their own (but which we can easily guess at) the province is being sketchy about how much they are taking in from taxing cannabis, having not made an estimate in their own budget and not likely to even make it a line item in the public accounts. Aberdeen and the SUMA Board are looking for the province to develop a cannabis excise tax-sharing agreement with municipalities. The province has said that there's no point talking about this until we know how much money cannabis is bringing in (but, see above). They could also make an argument (and this is the same with alcohol or anything else) that cannabis taxes are already shared with municipalities via revenue sharing (which is currently based on PST, although that could change), so there's no need for an agreement or anything.

Another intriguing revenue-sharing type resolution comes from the Town of Gravelbourg, which is looking for whoever regulates these things to allow municipalities to take a piece of the action from fund-raising at gaming venues (bingo and such) that right now goes to the relief of poverty, the advancement of education, advancement of religion, and "other purposes that are of a broad community benefit as a whole."

This resolution should yield some pretty hearty debate, and we wouldn't be surprised to see it defeated.

The fact that three of the 10 resolutions this year are about finding new revenue sources could be a coincidence (municipalities have always wanted more money, more taxing ability, less things to worry about), or it could be an indication that years of revenue sharing decreases are placing unsustainable demands on the local property tax base and things are really starting to hurt.

Another resolution that seems fairly topical is from Candle Lake, where they are calling for the Minister of Government Relations to have the power to remove an elected official upon receiving from council "sufficient evidence of repeated code of ethics violations."

Historically the Minister of Government Relations has been extremely reluctant to remove officials from office (we can only think of one case) even where all the boxes are ticked, so we can't see how making the procedural fairness bar even lower would make removal any more likely or any less likely to result in costly and time-consuming litigation. ■

From the CEO
MATT HELEY

Twenty eight is over and, by many accounts, it wasn't a good year.

That's obviously a pretty subjective judgement, but if we're making them, I'd nominate 2016 as worse. In any case, it's time to move on, so let's look at what's coming up.

Right off the bat we will probably see some news about the new five-year revenue sharing deal at SUMA in a couple of days. A question of mild interest is: who will deliver it? The premier or the Minister of Government Relations? My bet is the premier if it's bad or neutral news, and the minister if it's good news. Let's see how close we get to the pin.

Staying at the provincial level, the carbon tax fight is obviously going to be the dominant issue this year, perhaps all the way up to the 2020 election—assuming we don't see a change of government at the federal level. If you're of the mind that the SaskParty has become a little too bogged-down by carbon tax and pipeline politics, then you

wouldn't be alone. Populism is the in-thing right now.

As we've said before, the carbon tax fight does strike us as a missed opportunity to have a discussion about climate change mitigation and preparedness, activities which could be as simple as helping northern communities to get FireSmart. The dollar estimates we have for the amount of work that needs to happen around the northern municipalities is about \$4 million, most of that related to the clearing and thinning of about 2000 hectares of boreal forest. That's \$4 million to protect assets worth hundreds of millions.

Of course, the whole thing is a double-edged sword. While northern communities are extremely vulnerable to the impact of climate change, they are also very sensitive, perhaps more than anyone, to increases in the price of energy and basic goods that some think will come with a carbon tax. That's certainly the government's messaging, but it shouldn't be the *only* messaging.

Being a federal election year we can expect plenty of pork barrelling from the

major parties. The Liberals have committed billions to new housing programs, although, a little cynically, timing the release of most of the money until after the actual election. Nevertheless, we have heard whispers that the federal housing supplement will be up and running *before* the election. The feds are strongly leaning toward making the supplement "portable"—meaning that cash will flow straight to the household, rather than to the landlord, and operate more like an income supplement.

Closer to home, we think that this year will be a good one for innovative administrative capacity development initiatives. The Northern Administrators Association is set to launch sometime in the Spring, perhaps at the New North Administrators Conference in April which, we believe, will be an important step toward addressing the training and career development needs of northern municipal staff.

We think that an Administrative Circuit Rider program will be close to getting the green light by the end of the year, as well. ■

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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