



# Vaccination Program to Prioritize Northerners ... ... But Many Questions Remain

In a year in which hope has become the play-thing of a malignant, treacherous yet somehow cold and indifferent universe, the federal government's approval of the Pfizer vaccine and news that a roll-out would begin immediately is positioning 2021 as the year in which we can put back that extra 24 pack of toilet paper, dust off our social skills, and, perhaps shyly and with the kind of caution you might exhibit around a tiger shark or used car dealer, let hope back into our lives, or at least allow ourselves to glimmer it, as one might glimmer a solar eclipse, projected through a pinhole at the end of a tube.

With what they referred to as a "pilot project," the provincial government launched its vaccination program with the inoculation of 1950 health care workers administered at the Regina General Hospital mid-December, with Phase 1 set to begin late December targeting "priority populations," with 202,000 doses planned, the recipients of which include almost 9,000 northerners.

The Pfizer vaccine needs to stay at temperatures of minus 70 to remain effective and poses challenges to its roll-out, even in Saskatchewan, where it only *feels* like minus 70.

The province's roll out schedule is based on the recommendations of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI), which has been reviewed and appropriately "modified based on applicability to Saskatchewan's demographics and logistical requirements."

What that means, in Saskatchewan, in Phase 1, is the following:

1. 30,584 long-term care and personal care residents and staff will get it;
2. Up to 15,000 healthcare workers in emergency departments ICUs, COVID 19 wards, and testing centres will get it;
3. Residents 80 years and older across Saskatchewan, followed by those in the 70-80 age group as supplies allow, will get it;
4. 8,900 residents over 50 living in northern and remote communities will get it. (No mention of Indigenous communities, though).

Phase 1 is expected to last until about April, whereupon Phase 2 will begin, targeting everyone else.

Phase 1 vaccinations will take place in long-term and personal care homes and places of work, and in Phase 2 mass vaccination centres will be set up and administered by anyone handy with a needle and a passion for saying "this won't hurt" over and over, including physicians, nurse practitioners and pharmacists.

An updated plan was released by the province in late 2020 following the approval of the Moderna vaccine. Because the Moderna vaccine is easier to transport it is being sent to northern and remote communities.

The latest plan offers some inkling of how the province will utilize the "zone system" to determine where the vaccines will be sent, and in what numbers.

The plan says that 4900 doses are ear-marked for the Far North Central zone (the Athabasca region), and the Far North West Zone, with delivery expected in the first and second weeks of January.

The Far North West zone includes communities not commonly thought of as "in the north," some of which have much lower "attack rates" (ie, infection rates) than communities in the Far North East zone, which will not, according to the plan, be receiving any of the first batch of vaccines.

Of particular concern is that the Long Term Care homes in La Ronge and Pinehouse have been overlooked entirely. Given the Pinehouse breakout, the oversight seems particularly egregious.

It is thought that were the province to take a community-by-community approach, rather than a zonal approach, they could more easily target the most vulnerable northern populations, as per the national guidelines.

# NewNorth News & Updates

## New North Joins Immunization Municipal Advisory Committee

As the province ramps up its vaccination delivery program it's also ramping up its consultation and advisory capacity, forming, among others, a municipal advisory committee (MAC) to support the work of the COVID 19 Immunization Planning Oversight Committee, whose members include officials from the Ministry of Health, Government Relations, the Sask Public Safety Agency, Indigenous Services Canada, and the SHA.

New North is joining SUMA, SARM, Government Relations and others on the MAC to provide insights and recommendations to the Oversight committee on a range of issues including logistics, communications, and the removal of barriers to ensure the vaccination program proceeds as smoothly as possible.

As always, let us know if you have any concerns you'd like brought forward.

## Despite, You Know, Everything, Province Moving Ahead With Eligibility Requirements for NRS

Introducing eligibility requirements for municipal revenue sharing (which in the north, we call NRS, for Northern Revenue Sharing) was always going to be part of the new revenue sharing deal and was something virtually no one in the municipal sector objected to. After a bit of time tinkering around with different settings, the agreed upon criteria was circulated in 2019, with the province moving to a test of the new declaration system in early 2020.

The test didn't go great for the northern municipalities as less than 50% of them submitted their declarations by the deadline. In a non-test year, according to the province, they'd have been automatically disqualified from receiving revenue sharing.

The non-test year is this year, 2021.

The province says that any municipality that fails to submit their declaration of eligibility by the deadline of January 31 (see below) will have their grant withheld for 2021-22.

What's really critical to know about this—and I can't emphasize this enough—is that you submit a declaration of eligibility even if you don't meet all the eligibility criteria.

We can't be sure, but we suspect that's why so many northern municipalities failed to submit their declarations in the test: they, very logically assumed that since they didn't meet the criteria they couldn't very well attest that they did, and therefore didn't submit a declaration.

Or maybe there's some other reason.

In any case, what we are being told by the province is that not meeting eligibility criteria may not disqualify municipalities from receiving revenue sharing, but failing to submit the declaration of eligibility definitely will.

New North has advocated for a gradual introduction of eligibility requirements.

There'll be more communication from the province about this at the Municipalities of Saskatchewan Northern Regional Virtual Meeting at their virtual convention in early February.

## Municipal Revenue Sharing Grant Declaration of Eligibility

A unique link and password for the online Municipal Revenue Sharing Declaration of Eligibility was emailed to each municipality on **November 13, 2020**.

- o Administrators: if you did not receive the email, please check your SPAM/JUNK folder. If the email is not in your SPAM/JUNK folder, please email [grcompliance@gov.sk.ca](mailto:grcompliance@gov.sk.ca) requesting the email to be re-sent.
- o Reminder that submission of the Declaration of Eligibility, which includes a resolution from

council, and meeting the Eligibility Requirements is required to avoid the municipality's Municipal Revenue Sharing grant for the 2021-22 year from being withheld. The deadline for submission of the Declaration of Eligibility will be January 31, 2021. **You will want to ensure that the Declaration of Eligibility is included on the November, December or January council meeting agenda.**

## From the New North Chair

By Bruce Fidler

I was once again very proud to be elected to the New North Executive at our AGM in December, and to once again have been entrusted with the Chair position by my fellow board members.

I'm joined by Mayor Ovide Michel, who is New North's Member at Large, Mayor Daniel Powder from Stony Rapids, and Mayor Georgina Jolibois from La Loche and Councillor Jordan McPhail from La Ronge, who are New North's Deputy Chair and Treasurer respectively.

The new board will meet in January to plot our new direction for this term. Our bylaws require us to conduct a strategic plan in every year divisible by five—which is technically 2020—but 2021 is close enough. A strategic planning session involving all our members is scheduled for wherever our next in-person gathering is, which I think is likely to be in June or July, circumstances permitting. We will also have a “newly elected” workshop alongside to make it worthwhile for our members to make the trip down.

In the meantime we're closely monitoring the roll-out of the different COVID vaccines. The picture seems to be changing

everyday as shipments of the vaccines arrive in Saskatchewan and new vaccines are given approval. The challenges seem to be mostly logistical ones right now, as not only is there not enough to go around, but those vaccines they have, like the Pfizer one, need to be transported and stored in very cold temperatures, even colder than we have in the north!

Newer vaccines are apparently only days or weeks away from getting approval, some of which don't need to be kept in a deep freeze. The AstraZeneca vaccine, for example, can be stored in a regular fridge.

We are optimistic that the province will do a good job rolling out the vaccine. For their part, it is vitally important that they maintain strong communication, and maximum transparency, with the public, justifying why some groups will be prioritized over others. We feel that as long the roll out makes sense to people then they will have the trust of the population. At this point we are not concerned but, as I say, we will be watching the roll out closely.

## From the New North CEO

By Matt Heley

While it is customary for us to demonstrate our skills at prognostication in the first newsletter of each year, it seems like a particularly foolish endeavour now, given how things worked out last year. But I'm nothing if not a fool, so here goes:

### **It will feel weird not wearing a mask**

The “wallet, phone, keys” routine was augmented in 2020 with the addition of “mask” as a condition of entering civil society, to the point where *not* wearing a mask can cause one of those sudden spasms of self-consciousness that accompanies an awareness of wrong-doing, even when we're sitting alone at the kitchen table, bingeing Netflix on the couch, or creating a travesty in the workshop. The normalization of mask wearing is great (and even as I am writing this in my office, completely alone, I feel an odd sensation of nakedness in the philtrum area—odder than usual, anyway), but it may be a tough habit to break.

### **People will forget why the north got priority for vaccines**

The vulnerability of remote, northern and Indigenous communities to the impacts of COVID-19 meant that they were earmarked as priority populations in the federal immunization guidelines, which the provinces are utilizing to perform their vaccine roll outs.

How quickly, once some level of normalcy is obtained, will the reasons for this vulnerability be forgotten?

### **It will be a tough year financially for many**

It is estimated that federal and provincial government financial support during the COVID pandemic has been about about \$469 billion, almost all of it being carried by the federal government. The Conference Board of Canada says that the extent of government support has actually lifted total household income *above* 2019 levels.

That government support will inevitably stop, but will the economy be in any place to cushion the fall?

### **There will be vaccine “Haves,” and Vaccine “Have-Nots”**

The question of at what point governments lift the restrictions that will allow everyone to go back to “normal” is probably one of the biggest policy questions anyone will have to face this year. By choice, everything depends on vaccine take up. Complicating things is that not everyone will be able to get the vaccine—no tests, as far as we know, have involved children. Others will be unable to get vaccinated because of underlying health conditions. Ironically, those unable to get vaccinated will be relying, and strongly hoping, that everyone else gets vaccinated to build “herd immunity,” thus (hopefully) halting the circulation of the virus. (Assuming the vaccine can prevent the spread, which is to date another unknown.)

### Northern Leaders Call for Re-Introduction of Critical Incident Teams in Northern Saskatchewan

A resolution urging the Saskatchewan Health Authority and the provincial government to re-introduce critical incident and crisis intervention teams in northern Saskatchewan was unanimously supported by northern leaders gathered at the New North Annual General Meeting on December 11 in Prince Albert.

The resolution—brought forward by Mayor of Beauval Nick Daigneault—argued for the crucial role of such teams in ameliorating the impacts of trauma on communities following serious critical events, such as suicides, motor vehicle accidents and other such occurrences.

The resolution notes that the northern health regions once had teams in place which could mobilize resources and provide mental health supports to young people following a traumatic incident, but these teams are not funded or staffed on an on-going basis.

In speaking to the resolution, Mayor Daigneault noted that volunteers in his community often play this role but are becoming increasingly overwhelmed themselves by the emotional toll.

The resolution says that youth can often turn to substances as a way of deal with or processing traumatic events. Crisis intervention is key to breaking the cycle.

According to statistics provided by Northern Population Health, Injuries are the leading causes of death in most age groups in the north with intentional self-harm, motor vehicle traffic crashes, assault, and accidental poisonings being most common.

#### New North Executive Elected

The AGM saw new members elected to the New North Executive. Mayor Bruce Filder was elected in the East Sector (and remains New North Chair), Mayor Georgina Jolibois was elected for the West Sector and is Deputy Chair, Mayor Daniel Powder is the Far North representative, Councillor Jordan McPhail was elected to represent the Central Sector, and is Treasurer, and Mayor Ovide Michel is the Member at Large.

#### “Northern Infrastructure Corridor” Concept Unveiled

The meeting also heard from Chris Hornsby, the CEO of Elemental Power, and Mark Ruest, from Tyla Industries, who spoke about the exciting possibilities presented by the Northern Infrastructure Corridor concept. The NIC is a plan to link the east and west coast of Canada with road, rail, data communications and power infrastructure. The idea was the subject of Senate Committee on Banking, Trade and Commerce report, which said that the building of the corridor would have the same impact on the development of Canada as the establishment of rail networks in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Any plan to establish such a corridor would need to involve the communities that would be impacted by it, which is why Elemental is now approaching the northern municipalities to figure out a strategy of how we can all work together to make the dream a reality and to ensure maximum benefits flow to northern people.

New North members passed a resolution supporting the ongoing engagement with Elemental on the NIC concept.

### All The Northern Municipalities Act Amendments Ready to Be Talked About

Amendments to *The Northern Municipalities Act* passed through the Legislative Assembly in July 2020, but not all came into force at that time.

Amendments coming into force as of January 1 include, among others, requirements that the auditor report to council on the audited financial statements of a controlled corporation and others involving assessment appeals.

Amendments already in play include a slightly new definition of conflict of interest, the creation of a default setting whereby the Administrator is responsible for

human resources (of course, Council is responsible for appointing the Administrator), and a lot of others; the Act really hadn't been properly updated since 2012, so there was a lot to cover.

Check the November issue of *Municipalities Today* (motto: Municipalities Today, Something Else Tomorrow)—the government's own municipal newsletter with news and views and the latest reviews of the shows they're all bingeing right now—for the full list of legislative amendments.

### Northern Municipal Trust Account's Circuit Rider Program Wins Award

The high quality of the drinking water in northern Saskatchewan is often attributed to the fact that the raw material is mostly pure rain water and doesn't need a lot done to it apart from filtering out the bugs and occasional fishing boat and of course adding mountains of chlorine for that just-got-out-of-the-swimming pool zest. But this is to understate the role of the many programs, people and supports in place that ensure everything works as it should and all rain boots are retrieved from the sewage lagoon.

These include the Northern Water and Sewer Program, the Emergency Water and Sewer Repair program, New North's waterworks conferences, the Water Security Agency, and the circuit rider program.

Circuit rider programs aimed at providing onsite hands-on training to water operators have been around since the 80s and were put in place when someone realized that building multi-million dollar waterworks without training those responsible for operating them was a recipe for disaster or at least a series of really bad hair days.

In Saskatchewan such programs were initially only a support to First Nation run waterworks in the north.

The present circuit rider program started in 2003 and is funded by the Northern Municipal Trust Account and administered by ATAP and provides support to 31 northern communities.

This year the success of the program was recognized with the Exceptional Municipal Project award from Western Canada Water.

The citation acknowledges the key role of the circuit rider program in providing technical assistance, training and mentorship to the hundreds of northern municipal and First Nation water operators, and whose work aides in "protecting the operational life span of water infrastructure."

A mix up in communication means that the award is on display in the New North office.

### Targeted Sector Support Initiative: Cost-Shared Grants – Application Intake Coming Soon

**FROM MUNICIPALITIES TODAY**

Targeted Sector Support (TSS) is a portion of Municipal Revenue Sharing (\$1.5 million per fiscal year) used to encourage inter-community collaboration and good governance in all Saskatchewan municipalities. The funds are used to support projects that help advance the priorities set by the Steering Committee.

The Steering Committee consists of representatives from the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (SARM), the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association (SUMA), the Saskatchewan Association of Northern Communities (New North) and the Ministry of Government Relations.

The Steering Committee will soon be accepting applications for funding under this program. The application period is expected to run from January 25, 2021 to March 5, 2021.

### Suicide Rates in 2020 Below Last Year's Levels, But Big, Big Caveat Required

Virtually everyone thought suicide rates across Canada would soar in 2020. This was largely because economic conditions are often a predictor of suicide, and so with the expected economic downturn would come a surge in the rate of people taking their own lives.

Preliminary figures released by the Saskatchewan Coroner's Office show that the number of suicides in Saskatchewan—at least up until late October—are on track to be dramatically lower than 2019.

For the first 10 months of 2020, there have been 107 suicides, down from 204 in the 12 months prior.

The caveat here is that suicides for those identified as First Nation males are only down by one third—29 in 2020, versus 40 in 2019.

We can only speculate why suicide rates have defied expectations, but the level of financial support from government, and the society-wide focus on "wellness" during these tough times, might be factors. If so, those are certainly lessons to be learned.

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# New North Economic Development Initiative: Update

By Roy Anderson, Project Lead

The emergence of COVID-19 created an entirely new set of challenges for municipal leaders in northern Saskatchewan, and it's reasonable to assume the impacts from the pandemic may continue to ripple through communities well into 2021. While the notion of a prolonged battle with the virus has no appeal, the related considerations have generated opportunities to plan for post-COVID.

With support from the Federal government, New North has initiated a project generally following COVID-19 impact and recovery themes. The original scope description states the project will 'assess the economic and financial impact of COVID-19 on northern local businesses and governments, and deliver training of business development and procurement opportunities.' While a central goal is to investigate the impacts of the pandemic on the financial health of the community, a key thread is the investigation of opportunities for municipalities to engage in local economic development and job creation.

The project includes five related deliverables, as follows.

Snapshot of COVID-19 Impacts – early in 2021, project team members will be reaching out to municipal leaders and administrators to discuss how the pandemic has impacted their community – as well as the municipality itself. These discussions will focus primarily on financial and economic changes, those that have been experienced already as well as those that are expected to come about in 2021.

Financial Health Picture – research has been completed on how the financial health of a municipality is best defined. With this background information considered, a tool is being created that will be used to establish snapshots and trends on the overall financial health of the municipalities within the Northern Saskatchewan Administrative District (NSAD). This data will be key to identifying current and emerging needs, opportunities and risks related to financial health – historically and related specifically to 2020.

Procurement Opportunities – a broad range of development that takes place each year in the NSAD, and much of this work is awarded through a procurement process. Governments,

Crown Corporations, corporations involved in sectors such as mining and forestry – all go through forms of procurement for their projects. There are also municipalities that have partnerships and investments that support local economic development. This piece of the project will investigate both of these streams, with an eye on summarizing the state of economic development and procurement, and the identification of key opportunities to more effectively bring these two streams together.

Northern Training and Development Forum – the different pieces of this project will all be brought together in a summary of key findings to be presented at a northern forum. The priority for the forum will be to share knowledge and information on driving local job creation through procurement strategies, and most importantly, insight and training on the 'how to'. The forum will include the participation of key representatives from related procuring agencies, will include the sharing of support tools, and will provide for the workshopping of 'procurement' case studies.

Yes – it is quite possible that ongoing COVID-19 restrictions may take the opportunity for the in-person forum off of the table (project deliverables must be completed by March 30, 2021). Should this be the case, alternative plans will be made to roll out the information and tools to municipalities.

Representatives from R. Anderson & Associates are working with New North on this project. Efforts of this nature rely heavily on input from the front lines, so the project team members (Roy and Jaime) will be reaching out to municipal representatives early in 2021 to schedule conversations related to the project topics.

# There's No Plan B, So Vaccines Better Work

In terms of a national approach to beating COVID, the provinces have been acting like they all got different songs to learn for the couch choir auditions and are more or less now just winging it until the vaccine arrives. This might appear like a sound plan but it's actually just a desperate one; had the provinces handled this better, a vaccine—adequately tested or not—would not have been the only way out.

The reason that some jurisdictions—Australia and New Zealand come to mind—can sit back and wait to see how vaccines work out everywhere else is precisely because they have COVID under control, or as in New Zealand, have more or less eliminated it. A very strong government response and high levels of co-operation in civil society have done the trick. If vaccines fail, those places have a Plan B.

Not so in many other places, including most Canadian provinces.

As it is, the COVID vaccine roll out is now the most important immunological public health initiative in anyone's living memory—and there have been plenty of mass immunizations in that time (polio, TB, measles, smallpox, etc).

What makes this one different is the urgency, the fact that it's not mandatory, and that, at this stage, children are actually excluded from it, rather than its main targets.

The challenges of getting the vaccine into people's arms are not just logistical. Most vaccines, such as the flu vaccine, can be stored at the same temperature as a can of Diet Pepsi. In fact, how many times have you gone into the local clinic to get your flu shot and noticed them getting it out of the same fridge they're storing their chicken-egg salad sandwich in? Well, hopefully never, but they could.

Right now, the two vaccines which have been approved for use in Canada—made by Pfizer and Moderna—need to be handled with kid gloves. The Pfizer vaccine has to be stored and transported at minus 70. There are not many facilities in Saskatchewan, let alone Canada, that have those kinds of freezers. The province has just one. They have ordered 25 or so more but, as can be imagined, so has everyone else.

The Moderna vaccine can be kept at minus 20, and so, in theory, can be stored in a snow bank, or least a regular freezer.

Understandably, not wanting to waste a single shot, the province is balancing the logistical and ethical concerns in their decision-making around who gets the vaccine first.

The biggest challenge, though, may not be logistical at all. The fact is, no one has any real idea what the level of take-up of the vaccine will be, and this is a huge concern, especially for those who cannot get the vaccine for medical reasons, and who require everyone else to in order to build herd immunity.

There have been polls, for sure. For example, a poll in Saskatchewan in November conducted by Global news showed

that less than 30% would get the COVID vaccine immediately (nationally it was 40%). About 36% said they would get the vaccine eventually, presumably concerned about its safety.

We might look at vaccination rates for the flu. Nationally, the rate of flu vaccination sits at about 40% across the board. Interestingly (and not surprisingly), more women get vaccinated than men (46% vs 37%).

What is particularly surprising about this data is how it was collected: it was collected via market research (ie, polling). There is no national, or even provincial database, that keeps track of flu vaccination rates. This is because of all the different ways the flu vaccines are administered (ie, by pharmacists, public health nurses in clinics, at LTC homes etc). Some are hooked into the systems that do data collections, and others (like pharmacists) are not.

The data for those in high risk groups—those aged above 65—is probably fairly accurate, and luckily their flu vaccination rates are quite high, at around 70%

In some ways it is serendipitous that those at the highest risk of being adversely affected by COVID—those in the 70 plus age range—are also least resistant to the idea of getting vaccines in general. As are, for the most part, health workers, who are also both a high risk category, and also, for that reason, prioritized. Their example will be critical for others to follow.

But what about northerners? Will there be any reluctance there? Again, we have no recent data to go on. Back in the 2000s, Northern Population Health was able to report that flu vaccination rates were significantly higher than the national average, at about 51% in 2007, down from 71% in the early part of the decade.

Of course, flu vaccines have been around for years, and there are few reports of side-effects. COVID vaccines are brand new.

Public resistance to getting the COVID vaccine is obviously a concern to the province and health authorities, and a large-scale campaign will likely be launched to address people's fears and concerns.

A perhaps more sobering thought is that even *with* vaccine rates around 70% for the elderly, and 50% for the general population, this may not be enough for governments to lift the full suite of restrictions currently in place.

The flu, which is not as contagious as COVID, requires a mass vaccination rate of 50% to keep it under pandemic levels.

Health Canada has said we will need more than 60% to reach herd immunity for COVID, while other experts are suggesting 80%.

This is what the provinces are betting the farm on.

## Funding For MMIWG Projects Increased, Deadline Extended

The Ministry of Government Relations, First Nations, Métis and Northern Affairs is providing \$400,000, up from \$300,000 announced in June, for “projects that address inter-personal violence and raise awareness of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG).”

The grant program is open to:

- First Nations Band Councils or Tribal Councils;
- Métis Nation-Saskatchewan Locals;
- First Nations or Métis representative organizations;
- Indigenous non-profit organizations;
- Non-Indigenous, non-profit organization seeking partnerships with Indigenous communities or whose programs/services benefit a primarily First Nations or Métis clientele; and
- Provincial municipalities.

The ministry may provide a maximum of \$15,000 for community projects or \$45,000 for regional or multi-party projects.

Applications should aim to request no more than 40% of total project costs; however, it appears they might take a discretionary approach to that. Also, in-kind contributions may be considered towards total project costs.

Successful applications for far include:

- Engaging Young Leaders of Today by Big Brothers Big Sisters Yorkton Area;
- The Treaty Land Sharing Network by the Office of the Treaty Commissioner;
- Women & Girls Wellness Group by the La Loche Friendship Centre;
- Grandmothers’ Teachings by the Treaty Education Alliance; and
- The Family Wellness and Healing Project by the Northwest Friendship Centre Inc.

**The deadline for applications is January 15, 2021.**

Email New North or [fnmr@gov.sk.ca](mailto:fnmr@gov.sk.ca) for more information.

### 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.

#### New North Executive

Mayor Bruce Fidler (Chair)  
 Mayor Georgina Jolibois (Deputy Chair)  
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