



2-26S Changes to Provincial Bridge and Culvert Classifications

Resolution Report

Resolutions play an important role guiding RMA's advocacy approach and position development. As part of RMA's commitment to consistent member reporting on resolution advocacy, the "Resolution Report" series includes regularly-released short reports providing members, government and stakeholders with an overview of an endorsed resolution, including the current context, impact on RMA members, and RMA positions in relation to solutions to address the issue. The reports are not intended to be all-encompassing, but rather provide readers with a quick overview of the issue and why it matters to rural municipalities.

For information on resolutions not featured in the series, please review the [RMA Resolutions Database](#) or the [RMA Resolutions Status Update](#) document, which is published twice each year with current statuses and developments for all active resolutions.





TRANSPORTATION & INFRASTRUCTURE

Introduction

Resolution [2-26S: Changes to Provincial Bridge and Culvert Classification](#) calls on the Government of Alberta to undertake two specific and interrelated actions:

1. Review and amend Alberta's definition of a bridge so that only culverts with a span of 3000 mm or greater are classified as bridge structures, aligning Alberta with national practice; and
2. Investigate cost-effective bridge replacement and maintenance options that would support municipalities in managing their aging transportation infrastructure.

Identifying the Key Issue

The resolution responds to a longstanding and increasingly urgent challenge: the prohibitive cost of replacing and maintaining rural bridge infrastructure.

Bridge and culvert construction and maintenance is a municipal responsibility that is expensive, highly regulated, and time intensive, often requiring coordinated participation from engineers, municipal administrators, and contractors. Each project must navigate a tightly defined regulatory framework that governs design standards, environmental considerations, safety requirements, and long-term obligations.

Municipalities must ensure that the engineering designs of every bridge or bridge sized culvert meet provincial and federal standards. This includes ensuring that all contractors adhere to strict construction and safety protocols, and that all regulatory approvals are secured before construction begins. While these are significant administrative and financial burdens, they exist to protect public safety and environmental conditions while ensuring infrastructure longevity.

The technical complexity of some projects introduce liability risks. Engineers and contractors must certify that their work complies with provincial codes; municipalities are responsible for authorizing, funding, and maintaining the structure. Any deficiencies (whether in design, construction, or inspection) may expose all parties to legal and financial risk.

As a result, even relatively small bridge or culvert projects can become major municipal undertakings, consuming staff time, engineering capacity, and budgets. This reality underscores why cost-effective design standards, appropriate classification thresholds, and accessible provincial funding programs are essential to ensuring that municipalities can maintain safe and reliable transportation networks.

These escalating costs are occurring while many rural municipalities face a wave of aging bridge assets approaching their end-of-life and the overall rural municipal infrastructure deficit increasing rapidly. Replacement costs are projected to be in the tens of millions of dollars for many municipalities.

Such is the concern surrounding infrastructure development that RMA has heightened them to general policy statements, including:

- that the rural municipal perspective must be embedded in both provincial and federal infrastructure policy;
- long-term stability and predictability in funding commitments from provincial and federal government is necessary for sustainability and to ensure the continued viability of both rural municipalities and the provincial economy;
- acknowledging that construction, operation, and maintenance of rural transportation infrastructure consume over half of most rural municipal budget, a problem compounded by diminished provincial funding and increased provincial downloading; and
- that roads and bridges link Alberta's resource industries to supply chains, and inadequate funding or maintenance not only isolates communities but also undermines the province's economic competitiveness.

These concerns previously prompted the development of the [Rural Municipal Infrastructure Deficit Project](#) (RMIDP), quantifying the long-term financial consequences of delaying infrastructure repair, maintenance, and replacement. The findings reinforce that sustainable infrastructure requires more than increased funding alone. Meaningful reform of the regulatory and project delivery framework is just as necessary.

Modernizing design standards where appropriate, streamlining approval processes, reducing unnecessary administrative burdens, and ensuring regulations reflect the realities of rural municipalities will help deliver bridge infrastructure more efficiently without compromising public safety or environmental protection. As rural infrastructure continues to age and replacement costs rise, reform is essential to ensuring municipalities can maintain safe and vital bridges and roads.

Funding Concerns

While the Government of Alberta has allocated additional funding for infrastructure repairs in recent years, these marginal increases remain dwarfed by the scale of the provincial bridge infrastructure cost.

Findings from RMA's RMIDP indicate that, as of 2024, rural municipalities faced a combined [\\$2.29 billion](#) in costs to restore Alberta's rural municipal bridge network to a stable and maintainable condition. The Government of Alberta has only allocated [\\$29.3 million](#) to the Strategic Transportation Infrastructure Program (STIP) for the 2026-2027 fiscal year, a fund dedicated to supporting municipal infrastructure projects, and a fund that is shared between bridge, airport, and road projects, as well as other local initiatives. Any additional funding is expected to come from the municipalities.

The RMIDP figure reflects only rural municipal assets; it does not account for continued deterioration, inflationary pressures, or the compounding effect of aging infrastructure across the province. As a result, the total cost of repairing or replacing all bridges and culverts in Alberta is likely much larger than initially reported and continues to rise each year.

Despite the incremental increases to STIP, current provincial funding levels (as shown above) remain insufficient to meaningfully reduce the growing backlog of rural bridge projects. Municipalities are left managing an expanding inventory of aging structures with limited financial tools, forcing difficult decisions about project prioritization, acceptable risk, and long-term asset management.

Ensuring that bridge and culvert can be managed efficiently is essential to stretching limited funding across the greatest number of required repairs. Without reforms to classification thresholds, design requirements, and funding mechanisms, municipalities will continue to face escalating costs that outpace available resources, deepening the infrastructure deficit and constraining their ability to maintain safe, reliable transportation networks.



How it impacts RMA Members

For rural municipalities, the current classification system directly affects:

- *Financial sustainability* – as significantly high project costs strain local budgets and take funds from other essential infrastructure.
- *Asset management planning* – the inflated cost of replacing culverts and bridges accelerates infrastructure deficits and limits long-term planning flexibility.
- *Service levels and safety* – since delayed or unaffordable replacements can compromise transportation networks that support residents, industry, and emergency response.
- *Access to provincial funding* – STIP's limited capacity forces municipalities to compete for insufficient funding while facing disproportionately high project costs.

Without substantive provincial action, municipalities must continue to raise funding and manage their bridge networks through unsustainable means such as increased local taxation, choosing between extended replace schedules and maintenance, or implementing minor temporary repairs.



Analysis

There are two interconnected challenges to fulfilling Resolution 2-26S: (1) Alberta's outlier bridge classification standard and (2) the high and inflexible costs associated with rural bridge replacement.

Achieving the intent of the resolution requires more than adjusting a definition – success requires a coordinated effort to modernize standards, clarify regulatory expectations, meaningfully integrate rural knowledge of the land to be used, and enable municipalities to adopt appropriate solutions that are meaningfully cost-effective.

RMA received a response from the Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors (TEC) that acknowledged the concerns raised in this Resolution; the Minister also committed to creating a working committee to review bridge and culvert classification issues as outlined in the resolution. RMA subsequently engaged TEC technical staff leads on bridge standards to better understand the regulatory and engineering implications of potential classification changes.

Based on RMA research, municipal feedback, and discussions with TEC representatives:

- Changing the definition alone will not eliminate engineering obligations; changes must occur in concert with regulatory updates. Liability for engineers, contractors, and municipalities would remain unchanged irrespective of definition parameters.

- Municipalities require engineering design, inspection, and certification from engineering associations and approval from federal and provincial regulators to avoid potential liability.
- Federal and provincial environmental requirements – particularly related to water velocity, habitat protection, and construction impacts on fish-bearing streams – often necessitate more complex and expensive structures to ensure protection of habitats and local ecology.
- Current TEC standards are designed for high-volume and high-consequence highways. These standards may not be appropriate for lower volume rural roads; but, municipalities are compelled to follow the standards due to risk and liability concerns.
- Cost-effective alternatives exist but require policy support. Prefabricated bridges, municipal risk tolerance policies, and differentiated standards for non-fish-bearing culverts could reduce costs, but municipalities need clarity and provincial alignment to adopt them confidently.
- TEC has begun reviewing inspection standards and may align with other jurisdictions in the future, but this process is in early stages with no known end-date.
- STIP funding remains insufficient. Even with recent increases, STIP is dwarfed by the scale of the rural bridge deficit, leaving municipalities with limited tools to manage aging infrastructure.

The greatest opportunity lies in advancing and validating cost-effective bridge replacement and maintenance approaches. Alberta's regulatory environment, engineering liability framework, and environmental oversight all significantly influence project costs – any meaningful progress must include a nuanced and systems-level approach.

To achieve the intent of the resolution, both the province and municipalities must be equipped to make informed and risk-appropriate decisions that balance affordability with safety and regulatory compliance.

Potential liability remains an inhibitor to short-term and lower-cost construction options. Potential liability, however, is also the most important safeguard for public safety and environmental protection. Any effort to reduce costs must therefore be paired with clear and defensible expectations around risk tolerance, engineering responsibility, and regulatory compliance to ensure that not only are bridges built, that they are built to appropriate and location-specific concerns.

Liability does not need to be a barrier; when managed appropriately, it can serve as a framework that enables municipalities to adopt innovative and cost-effective solutions while maintaining the integrity and safety of Alberta's bridge network.



Call to Action for Government

What can the government do to take meaningful action on the resolution? There are significant concerns that must be addressed to alleviate the bulk of the constraints on bridge and culvert development in rural Alberta. Any government response must take risk-aversion and cost-effectiveness into consideration when developing a plan. RMA suggests beginning with the following:

Develop a Provincial Framework for Municipal Risk-Tolerance

A provincially endorsed framework would enable municipalities to adopt risk-appropriate design expectations for low volume, and thereby low consequence, structures such as small bridges and culverts. By establishing clear parameters that are supported by regulators, municipalities could apply a tailored “municipal layer” of standards that reflect local conditions, traffic patterns, and acceptable levels of risk that engineers can confidently follow.

Such a framework would maintain necessary protections against liability while reducing the tendency toward overengineering. It would also provide municipalities with defensible guidance that aligns with provincial and federal regulatory expectations, thereby lowering uncertainty for engineers and contractors. When implemented effectively, this approach would drive down overall project costs while preserving public safety, environmental protection, and long-term asset reliability.

Establish a Provincial Catalogue of Approved Cost-Effective Bridge Solutions

The GOA should also launch a focused review of distribution rate design. This would involve formal proceedings on distribution rate design and regional equity, with explicit consideration of provincewide or regional equalization models, targeted affordability measures for high-cost areas, and alternative rate structures that reduce the burden on rural and low-usage customers.

Improving municipal and consumer access to regulatory processes must be established as a prerequisite for fully operationalizing this policy. Without clear, accessible pathways for participation, the broader policy objectives cannot be effectively implemented. A review of AUC Rule 022 and related practices could help facilitate participation by municipalities or their associations where their evidence would materially assist the AUC to address provincewide equity issues. Collaboration with the Utilities Consumer Advocate would also ensure that rural customers' interests are fully represented in these proceedings.

Clarify the Relationship Between TEC Standards and Municipal Funding Eligibility

Formal clarification of the relationship between TEC standards and municipal funding eligibility would significantly reduce unnecessary overengineering and allow municipalities to design structures that better reflect local conditions and risk profiles. Clear and publicly available guidance would empower municipalities to adopt cost-effective alternatives without the fear that deviation jeopardizes access to provincial programs.

Such clarification would also provide engineers and contractors with a consistent and authoritative understanding of when TEC standards are required, optional, or discretionary. This certainty would help prevent overly risk adverse interpretations that inflate project costs, extend timelines, and discourage the use of innovative solutions.



Final Word

Resolution 2-26S creates an important opportunity to reexamine the regulatory, engineering, and risk-tolerance mechanisms that drive the high cost of bridge and culvert construction in rural Alberta.

Ensuring that these mechanisms remain effective in the protection of the public and environmental is essential, but it must be done in a manner that is proportionate to local conditions and alive to the real consequences of failure.

RMA appreciates TEC's commitment to establishing a joint working group on bridge and culvert cost drivers, as this collaboration provides a meaningful pathway to develop practical, evidence-based solutions that balance safety, regulatory requirements, and municipal realities.

By bringing forward municipal perspectives and research, RMA aims to support the creation of approaches that help rural municipalities manage their infrastructure challenges in a safe, efficient, and cost-effective manner.