Community Services

Community services such as broadband, policing, education, healthcare, recreation, and Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) supports community viability and makes rural municipalities attractive places to live and grow. Although providing many of these services in rural areas requires innovative strategies and partnerships, rural municipalities strive to make their communities great places to live and invest.

What is RMA's position on the importance of community services in rural municipalities?

- Community services are proven economic drivers. For Alberta's rural municipalities to offer a quality of life that will attract and retain residents and support business and industrial development, strong community services must be available.

- Rural municipalities do not have the economies of scale to deliver some community services and often establish innovative collaborative agreements with neighbouring municipalities or local non-profit organizations to ensure their residents' needs are met.

- Community services often look different in rural areas than in urban areas. It is important that rural communities have the autonomy to offer services in a way that meets the local needs of their residents.

What financial considerations do rural municipalities have with respect to the provision of community services?

- Cost-sharing and other inter-municipal agreements (e.g. Intermunicipal Collaborative Frameworks [ICFs]) allow municipalities to work together to provide quality community services to their residents at a regional level. However, recent provincial decisions impacting municipal revenues may force some rural municipalities to reduce or eliminate their participation in delivery of regional community services.

- The local availability of community services is strongly linked to rural economic and community development. Funding for services that make municipalities attractive as places to live and work must be prioritized by all levels of government to promote economic investment in rural areas (e.g. rural schools, family and community support services, policing, broadband).

- The sustainability of rural municipalities relies on attracting a qualified workforce to provide community services. Having programs in place to attract and retain workers contributes to the success and viability of rural Alberta.

- Rural municipalities rely on property taxes as a major funding component of the community services they deliver. Any changes made to Alberta's assessment and taxation regime must consider potential impacts on the ability of municipalities to deliver services that will support industries and those working in rural areas.

What collaborative relationships are essential to developing quality rural community services?

- Due to low population densities, providing some services in rural areas may require innovative solutions including regional service delivery and cost-sharing arrangements with urban neighbours. These arrangements may be determined at the local level through Intermunicipal Collaboration Frameworks (ICFs) or other means.

- Many community services require collaboration among the Government of Alberta, the local municipality, and one or more non-profit organizations. It is critical that all organizations involved in the delivery of community services have a shared voice as to how the service is delivered within the community.

- Any provincially-led changes to how community services are funded and delivered must occur in conjunction with municipal and non-profit stakeholders. In many cases, different delivery models are required to meet unique local needs, and adopting a single province-wide delivery model may have unintended service or financial impacts in some rural and urban communities.

- Municipalities also work with other organizations and companies to support rural community development (e.g. school boards, library boards, community groups, internet service providers).

How does the work of RMA support the sustainability of rural community services?

- Through advocacy efforts, RMA works to increase awareness and support the sustainability of community services (e.g. collaboration with Family and Community Support Services Association of Alberta [FCSSAA], and RMA's rural broadband speed testing project).

- RMA champions the rural municipal perspective on community services through regular participation in province-wide committees (e.g. ALERT Civilian Advisory Committee, Alberta Police Interim Advisory Board, Federation Enhanced Rural Internet Committee).

What current community service-related issues are impacting rural Alberta?

Broadband

◆ Broadband internet access is essential to rural community-building and to attracting qualified professionals and industry to rural areas.

◆ The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission's (CRTC) declaration of broadband as a basic telecommunication service, and decision to increase the minimum connectivity speed threshold for an area to be considered "serviced" by broadband are both positive steps towards a consistent level of broadband service across Canada.

◆ Any funding programs developed by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) related to improving service in underserved areas must focus on isolated rural areas with the poorest connectivity speeds, and not allow funding recipients to only target areas that are slightly below the minimum threshold.

◆ To this point, the Alberta SuperNet has not been an effective tool to support rural final mile broadband access. However, the RMA is optimistic that Service Alberta's creation of a new SuperNet operating agreement will lead to the SuperNet realizing its potential to support rural broadband access throughout Alberta.

◆ RMA is engaged in a project to test broadband speeds in rural Alberta. This work will be used to demonstrate the gap in broadband speeds in rural Alberta.

◆ More information on rural broadband can be found in the RMA's "Broadband and Connectivity" position statements.

Rural Crime Prevention

◆ As rural crime rates have increased recently in many areas of Alberta, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Government of Alberta must collaborate with rural municipalities to seek local strategies to prevent and report criminal activities.

◆ Community input must be at the heart of a municipality's relationship with local RCMP.

◆ RMA is concerned with the Government of Alberta's decision to require rural municipalities to contribute to frontline policing costs in 2020. The costing model includes no indication that local service levels will be enhanced or that local input into policing will increase.

◆ The Government of Alberta's municipal police costing formula, which requires all rural municipalities and all urban municipalities with a population below 5000 to contribute a portion of frontline policing costs, requires rural municipalities to cover over 80% of the total costs that will be incurred by municipalities impacted by the model.

- While policing is critical to addressing rural crime, adequate investments in Crown prosecutors, as well as Family and Community Support Services and victims services is important to supporting safe rural communities.

- Victims services are a critical component of community safety and supporting vulnerable populations. Any changes to the current victims services delivery model must allow for effective local decision-making, and participation from municipalities, non-profit organizations, and volunteers.

- The creation of a provincial police force should not take place unless a detailed feasibility study proves that such an approach will reduce provincial and municipal policing costs and enhance service levels across the province.

- More information on rural crime prevention can be found in the RMA's "Policing and Rural Crime" position statements.

Seniors

- Aging in place and living independently are important strategies for providing seniors with an opportunity to age with dignity. Funding for home care, assisted living, and accessible transportation for seniors are all key components to supporting rural Alberta's aging population.

- Additional funding is needed to support small seniors' lodges to improve the ability of rural residents to live in supported faculties within their home communities.

- The safety and quality of seniors' lodges are a concern throughout Alberta. Consistent funding for upgrading seniors lodges to meet current building and fire safety codes will benefit rural municipalities by allowing community members to safely remain in their communities.

Education

- Constructive partnerships between municipalities and school boards are essential to selecting and servicing proper school sites and recruiting qualified teachers.

- Rural schools are integral to rural community viability, but many are closing due to low enrollment. This results in increased travel times for students, negates municipal investments into supporting infrastructure, and compromises the retention of rural residents.

- RMA is pleased by the Government of Alberta's recent introduction of the "K-12 Assurance and Funding Framework," as it includes two new grants (the Rural Small Schools Grant and the Geographic Grant) intended to support the viability of small rural schools with low enrollments.

- Teaching children in both urban and rural schools about farming, ranching, and other elements exclusive to rural living is vital for building understanding between agricultural producers and non-farming Albertans. The Alberta Education curriculum should be amended to reflect this.

- To attract and retain early childhood educators in rural communities, the Government of Alberta should reinstate the Benefit Contribution Grant for early childhood educators.

Libraries

- In many cases, rural libraries serve as community hubs, particularly for new Albertans. As such, a consistent and long-term approach to library funding that recognizes a continuously growing population is needed in order to sustain rural libraries as hubs of information, distance learning, and community-building.

- The current *Library Act* requires review and updating, as current requirements related to the hiring of professional librarians are placing significant financial strain on rural library systems.

Family and Community Support Services (FCSS)

- Social needs vary across the province. FCSS providers need greater autonomy to properly respond to community demand for such services.

- RMA is pleased by the Government of Alberta's commitment to maintain funding for Family and Community Support Services (FCSS). However, the FCSS Regulation lacks the flexibility that rural FCSS providers need to ensure that they provide the services needed in their communities. RMA looks forward to future discussions on how the FCSS Regulation can be amended to support flexibility and standardize reporting requirements.

- The current economic situation in Alberta is creating increased pressure on social services. Continued support for these programs during this economic downturn is essential.

- Agricultural producers face unique challenges and stresses. It is vital that farmers have access to 24/7 mental health support services from organizations that understand the unique nature of agriculture.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action

- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action call on municipal governments to educate public servants about the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal-Crown relations. RMA plays a role in ensuring the staff of our association are well informed on matters relating to the Indigenous Peoples of Alberta.

- RMA understands the importance of the Calls to Action and is in a position to support member municipalities in providing guidance of where to access resources and training opportunities to respond to the Calls to Action.

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