

Municipal Finances

Municipal finances garner considerable public attention because residents and businesses are directly affected through their responsibility to pay property taxes. Councils must allot those revenues to manage infrastructure and provide services in a fiscally responsible way. Municipal financial decisions are influenced by many factors including economic conditions, service level expectations from residents and businesses, and long-term municipal goals. Municipal finances are much more than numbers; they embody the purpose and priorities of a municipality.

What is RMA's position on the importance of municipal finances?

- ◆ A complete and accurate understanding of municipal finances must consider differences in service types, service levels and infrastructure responsibility among municipalities. Due to their large size, low population, and intensive industrial activity that is reliant on municipal roads and bridges, Alberta's rural municipalities spend much more on transportation compared to other municipalities in Alberta and across Canada. For example, in 2018 Alberta's rural municipalities spent nearly 50% of their total expenses on transportation costs, compared to just under 20% for all Alberta municipalities, and approximately 10% for municipalities in Ontario and British Columbia.
- ◆ Municipalities must operate according to the highest standards of financial transparency and accountability because taxation revenue is a municipality's primary source of funding. Municipalities must determine their local priorities and cover their operating and capital expenses with available tax revenues, and find alternative sources (ex. grants, loans) to cover the rest.
- ◆ In comparison to federal and provincial/territorial levels of government, municipalities receive only eight to ten cents of each tax dollar collected in Canada but are responsible for services and infrastructure expenses that significantly exceed those revenue levels.
- ◆ It is vital that the provincial and federal government support municipalities through long-term, predictable, and stable revenue sharing. Without predictable and consistent revenues, it is difficult to plan capital projects, to service interest payments, and to provide consistent levels of service to citizens.

What financial considerations do rural municipalities have with respect to municipal finances?

- ◆ Discussions on municipal finances cannot only focus on revenues. To accurately compare the finances of urban and rural municipalities, both revenues and expenditures must be considered. This is because expenses in rural municipalities are often higher than in urban municipalities due to extensive road networks, bridges, and both water and wastewater systems that need to be maintained.

- ♦ Population is a weak predictor of infrastructure expenses for most municipalities in the province. RMA supports the use of municipal assets as a primary funding formula measure, as these are often a stronger indication of need.
- ♦ To support financial planning and decision-making, municipalities require long-term, sustainable funding from other levels of government that is distributed in a way that recognizes the complex and diverse cost-drivers for municipalities of different types and sizes.
- ♦ Rural municipalities make substantial financial and service delivery contributions to their urban neighbours through various inter-municipal financial arrangements (which are currently being formalized through the development of intermunicipal collaboration frameworks). Through these agreements, rural municipalities work with their municipal neighbors to meet regional needs. These local solutions are often the best solutions, and the RMA supports local decision making to meet local and regional needs.
- ♦ Most municipalities do not have sufficient annual revenues from taxation and grants to build and maintain needed infrastructure. Each year, this infrastructure deficit grows while citizens' expectations increase. Prior to the initiation of any change in governance structure (annexation, amalgamation, dissolution), the infrastructure deficits of all impacted municipalities must be considered, as adding additional responsibilities to an already over-extended municipality may have unintended negative consequences.
- ♦ Municipal finances differ widely among municipalities within Alberta, as well as those in other parts of Canada. These differences are the result of the wide array of funding tools available to municipalities in some jurisdictions but not others, as well as different levels of provincial government financial support for municipalities. Additionally, municipalities in Alberta provide a wider range of services than those in neighbouring provinces, which also contributes to differences in both revenue-generation and expenses.

How does the work of RMA support the sustainability of municipal finances?

- ♦ RMA works collaboratively with all levels of government and other stakeholders to develop solutions to support sustainable municipal funding (e.g. Municipal Fiscal Framework).
- ♦ RMA provides the Government of Alberta with the rural municipal perspective on municipal finances during the development of provincial financial accountability tools such as the Municipal Measurement Index and Municipal Indicators.

What current funding-related issues are impacting rural Alberta?

Municipal Financial Reserves

- ◆ Financial reserves are an effective tool to support municipal asset management planning, as they allow for funds to be set aside to manage assets throughout their lifecycle.
- ◆ Financial reserves are not a measure of wealth, but rather are a planning tool used in different ways and to different extents by municipalities.
- ◆ Municipalities are not permitted to run deficit budgets, so reserves allow municipalities to save money for major infrastructure projects while abiding by their legislated financial management requirements.
- ◆ While municipalities can finance capital projects through debt, the amount of debt municipalities may incur is limited. Additionally, due to interest requirements, debt results in higher costs for municipalities and less efficient use of tax dollars.
- ◆ Municipalities are required to develop three-year operating and five-year capital plans. The development of long-term planning requires that municipalities have the ability to set aside funds for use on major projects in future years.

Municipal Measurement Index

- ◆ To properly support municipal transparency and accountability, the Municipal Measurement Index must include an educational component to ensure readers understand the meaning of the various statistics included, as well as why data may differ among municipalities of different types.
- ◆ The Municipal Measurement Index does not include information on the different services that municipalities deliver, and the role that service levels and infrastructure responsibilities play in influencing municipal financial decision-making. Without this information, the Municipal Measurement Index is at high risk of providing misleading information to Albertans.
- ◆ Municipalities already operate in a highly transparent manner. While the Municipal Measurement Index (MMI) will assist in making municipal financial information more accessible to the public, it is crucial that the MMI be designed in a way that minimizes the potential of data being misinterpreted.

Long-Term Municipal Funding

- ◆ As the Municipal Sustainability Initiative will expire in the 2021-22 budget year, the Government of Alberta has announced the Local Government Fiscal Framework, which will provide all municipalities other than Edmonton and Calgary with a combined \$405 million beginning in 2022.
- ◆ With so many types and sizes of municipalities in Alberta, fairly distributing Local Government Fiscal Framework funding will be a challenge. The Government of Alberta must work with RMA and the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association to ensure that the funding is distributed among municipalities in a way that is transparent and simple, balances predictability with flexibility, treats all municipalities equitably, and is neutral to local decision-making.

Defunding/Downloading

- ◆ When responsibilities are downloaded from the federal or provincial government to municipalities, they should be accompanied with the necessary resources and funding to finance that service delivery or responsibility (e.g. police costing).

Intermunicipal Collaboration Frameworks

- ◆ Intermunicipal Collaboration Frameworks (ICFs) must recognize that expenses associated with infrastructure maintenance and service provision are often much higher in rural municipalities than in urban, and as such all frameworks and agreements must reflect this reality.
- ◆ Changes to Alberta's assessment regime, and corresponding reductions in taxation revenue for rural municipalities, will impact the completion of intermunicipal collaboration frameworks (ICFs), as many rural municipalities will be forced to reduce their financial commitments to supporting infrastructure and service delivery in neighbouring municipalities.

Municipal Impacts of COVID-19

- ◆ Alberta's rural municipalities have been among the leaders in ensuring the safety and well-being of Albertans through a variety of means, including the enforcement of public health orders, the retrofitting of municipal facilities to support safe occupancy and use.
- ◆ Alberta's rural municipalities were instrumental in supporting rural industries during the COVID-19 pandemic through property tax deferrals.
- ◆ The Government of Alberta's Municipal Stimulus Program provided funding to municipalities for local infrastructure projects that would create jobs and support economic growth.
- ◆ The Government of Alberta and Government of Canada's Municipal Operating Support Transfer supports municipalities in offsetting COVID-19 operating costs incurred in areas such as lost revenue, increased staffing requirements, COVID-19-related capital expenses, and other areas.

Asset Management

- ◆ By properly monitoring the age and condition of infrastructure and developing a long-term plan for maintenance and replacement, municipalities will increase accountability and efficiency in both managing their assets and improving their service levels.
- ◆ Due to the long-term nature of asset management planning, it is critical to establish buy-in throughout the municipality, from council to front-line employees.
- ◆ Municipal financial reserves are critical to supporting effective asset management planning and allowing for long-term maintenance and repair of infrastructure assets to maintain adequate service levels.

- ◆ Asset management practices are becoming more common in municipalities across Canada and are becoming mandatory in some jurisdictions. RMA has prioritized building member capacity in asset management to prepare for possible future asset management requirements in provincial and federal grant funding.

Contact

Wyatt Skovron
Senior Policy Advisor
wyatt@RMAAlberta.com