

2021 Municipal Election

Albertans go to the polls every four years to elect municipal and school board representatives. The 2021 municipal elections are shaping up to be unique in several ways, and it is important for incumbents, new candidates, and those administering the nomination, campaigning, and election process to be prepared for an unprecedented election season.

Recent changes to the Local Authorities Election Act, the introduction of referendums and senate elections into the municipal election process, and the potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic give those involved with municipal elections more to think about than ever before.

Despite these changes and uncertainty, RMA has continued to emphasize the importance of municipal elections in providing Albertans a chance to provide direction on local issues and engage with the level of government closest to the people.

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

- ◆ As municipalities are the level of government closest to the people, municipal elections are extremely important to ensure that Albertans have a say in the direction of their local communities.
- ◆ Municipal elections are critical to supporting municipal accountability to residents. As local and municipal issues are often less publicized than provincial or federal issues, municipal election season represents the best opportunity to engage on local issues for many Albertans.
- ◆ For many Albertans interested in becoming involved in politics, municipal elections are often the most accessible entry point due to their local focus, limited partisanship, and relatively low-cost nomination and campaign requirements.

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

- ◆ The administration of municipal elections carries a cost for municipalities associated with administering the nomination process, hosting polling sites and recruiting and training election workers.
- ◆ Any additional administrative costs incurred by municipalities because of the addition of referendum questions and senate elections on the municipal ballot should be reimbursed by the Government of Alberta.
- ◆ RMA appreciates the Government of Alberta's implementation of a per capita grant to compensate municipalities for the administrative costs associated with the addition of referendum questions and senate elections on the municipal ballot. However, any associated costs incurred by a municipality beyond that covered by the grant should be reimbursed by the Government of Alberta.
- ◆ Fiscal transparency is crucial to fair and democratic municipal elections. RMA is concerned that the Government of Alberta's recent decision to no longer enable municipalities to, by bylaw, require candidates to file pre-election campaign finance disclosures is a step backwards in terms of election transparency.

How does the work of RMA support the effective delivery of municipal elections?

- ◆ RMA has strongly advocated to the Government of Alberta on recent election-related issues, including changes to the *Local Authorities Election Act*, the introduction of referendums and senate elections into the municipal election process, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the municipal election process.
- ◆ RMA's municipal election advocacy has been based around four key principles that describe an effective municipal election process:
 - ◇ *Inclusive and accessible* – all those meeting eligibility requirements should have reasonable means to participate as candidates, as well as to vote in an election.
 - ◇ *Fair and equitable* – all candidates should have comparable opportunities to participate in an election, including through campaigning and participating in the nomination process.
 - ◇ *Transparent and accountable* – all candidates should be required to disclose contributions received to ensure adherence to applicable campaign finance requirements.
 - ◇ *Nonpartisan and municipally-focused* – the campaigning and election process should be designed in such a way as to ensure that candidates are focused on and accountable to the interests of their municipality as opposed to a political party or broader ideology.
- ◆ RMA is collaborating with the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, the Association of Summer Villages of Alberta, and Alberta Municipal Affairs to develop training and education resources for new and returning municipal candidates.

What current municipal election-related issues are impacting rural Alberta?

Changes to the *Local Authorities Election Act*

- ◆ The Government of Alberta made significant changes to the *Local Authorities Election Act* in 2020 related to areas such as campaign financing, candidate financial disclosure requirements, third-party advertising, and other areas.
- ◆ Most of the changes that the Government of Alberta made to the *Local Authorities Election Act* in 2020 risk decreasing the local focus of municipal elections, reducing financial transparency, increasing partisanship, and allowing third-party advertisers more influence in municipal campaigns throughout the province.
- ◆ RMA is concerned that the Government of Alberta's replacement of the previous campaign contribution limit of \$4,000 per person in total, province-wide, with a new limit of \$5,000 per person, per candidate, across Alberta will allow those with the financial means to provide significant financial support to candidates in municipalities across the province, regardless of their municipality of residence.
 - ◇ RMA advocated for a campaign contribution process that only allowed Albertans to contribute to candidates within their municipality of residence as way to ensure municipal elections are focused on local issues.

- ◆ RMA is concerned with the Government of Alberta’s decision to narrow activities defined as third-party advertising by no longer considering advertising on an issue with which a council or candidate is associated as third-party advertising, and by removing requirements and regulation of third-party advertising outside of the municipal election period.
 - ◇ RMA advocated for an expansion of the definition of third-party advertising to reflect the increased use of digital advertising, the implementation of expense and contribution limits on third-party advertisers, and increased third-party advertiser financial reporting requirements.

Introduction of referendums and senate elections into the municipal election process

- ◆ In recent years, the Government of Alberta has passed legislation (the *Referendum Act* and the *Alberta Senate Election Act*) that will increase the use of referendums to gather direction from Albertans on provincewide issues and allow Albertans to select provincial representatives to be recommended for senate seats.
- ◆ Under the recently passed legislation, the Government of Alberta is empowered to insert referendum questions and senate elections into the municipal election process. Government decision-makers have indicated that they plan to use this ability in the upcoming 2021 municipal elections.
- ◆ Administering referendums and senate elections in conjunction with municipal elections may obscure local issues, increase the administrative burden on municipalities, and insert partisanship into municipal elections.
- ◆ Although expected referendum issues are completely outside municipal jurisdiction, it is likely that residents will expect municipal candidates to take referendum positions. This will obscure important local issues and may result in municipal candidates campaigning on provincial issues.
- ◆ There is a risk that linking municipal elections to partisan referendum issues could increase the influence of provincial or federal political parties on local political races. This influence could have far-reaching impacts on municipal autonomy and may distort or overshadow issue-based local elections.
- ◆ If the Government of Alberta moves forward with inserting referendum questions and senate elections into the municipal election process, it is critical that they develop a province-wide informational campaign explaining the difference between municipal elections, referendums, and senate elections, and encouraging candidates and residents to focus on local issues.

Impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on municipal election process

- ◆ The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all aspects of society, including preparation for the upcoming municipal campaign and election process.
- ◆ Nominations, campaigning, voting, and election administration all involve significant in-person engagement and face-to-face contact, which require modification due to the risks of COVID-19 transmission.
- ◆ RMA, in collaboration with AUMA, has advocated to the Government of Alberta for the modification of election-related requirements to lessen COVID-19 risks.

- ◆ RMA and AUMA jointly requested that the Minister of Municipal Affairs develop a regulation to expand the optional use of special (mail-in) ballots to reduce the number of in-person voters on election day. Unfortunately, the Government of Alberta does not plan to act on this request.
- ◆ The impacts of COVID-19 on election day are not yet known and will be impacted by the continued distribution of COVID-19 vaccines in Alberta. If indoor in-person gatherings are still restricted on election day, municipalities will face an extremely difficult process in balancing timely access to polls with adhering to public health requirements.

For more information visit: RMAAlberta.com

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