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RMA Confused and Concerned as Bill 20 Attacks Local Democracy

Nisku, AB, April 30, 2024 – On April 25, 2024, Bill 20: *Municipal Affairs Statutes Amendment Act, 2024* was tabled for first reading. The RMA is frustrated by many of the changes that the bill proposes to the *Municipal Government Act*. Alberta’s municipalities play a crucial role in ensuring that local planning, infrastructure, and service delivery meet the needs of Alberta’s diverse communities, people, and industries. The changes in Bill 20 will degrade municipal autonomy by allowing the province to easily intervene and reverse local decisions, and even remove elected municipal officials, with virtually no justification or process. Along with the formalization of political parties in local elections and Bill 18’s restriction of municipal-federal funding agreements without provincial approval, these changes are the latest and most serious attacks on municipalities, and will centralize more control over municipal issues in the hands of the province.

“Bill 20 assumes that the provincial government knows better than municipal councillors about what is best in their communities and that they should have the right to reverse local decisions and remove councillors they disagree with,” explained RMA President Paul McLauchlin. “This is not only an affront to municipalities, but also an affront to democracy in Alberta. Imagine if the federal government decided to pick and choose the provincial policies and leaders that they agreed with, and simply removed those that they didn’t like. Something tells me the provincial response would be one of anger, so it is no surprise that ours is the same when such over-the-top control is directed to local councillors.”

The *Municipal Government Act* already requires councillors to abide by certain standards and allows the Government of Alberta to address those not in compliance, including through removal. Bill 20 will allow the province to bypass existing processes and unilaterally dismiss a councillor based on an undefined “public interest” criterion. The province is using a recent high-profile isolated incident that resulted in councillors being removed from a municipality to justify a heavy-handed and top-down approach to councillor removals moving forward. Effective policy-making should not be reactive, and the response to one incident should not infringe on the ability of all councillors to do their jobs.

“This government is using recent high-profile conflicts to justify the introduction of a hammer to undermine the autonomy of all of Alberta’s municipalities. Not only is that unfair to the

hundreds of hard-working municipal councillors in the province, but it is also a terrible form of policy making,” commented McLauchlin. “While the Minister of Municipal Affairs is bending over backwards to tell everyone who will listen that he doesn’t plan to use these powers, his word is not enough. We’re talking about democratically elected officials that can be removed on the whims of the current government. While this Minister may not use the powers, what about the next Minister?”

To do their job properly, municipal leaders must feel safe to make difficult decisions. Much like at the provincial and federal level, some municipal decisions are controversial or unpopular. Bill 20 will allow the province to repeal or modify municipal bylaws after they have been consulted on and passed, with no apparent restrictions. Allowing this uncontrolled intrusion into municipal decision-making could have many major impacts on local government.

“Bylaws are crucial to determining municipal operations and community character. Giving the province total control to change or repeal those they don’t like runs contrary to the grassroots, conservative, anti-red tape values this provincial government claims to stand for,” emphasized McLauchlin. “Like the province, sometimes municipalities make decisions for the public good that some disagree with. If provincial Cabinet members believe that they are better positioned to make decisions on local issues than councillors, maybe they should run for municipal council. Until then, they should leave municipalities to make local decisions.”

While the province giving itself such sweeping power is troubling in isolation, the RMA is even more concerned with what it means for future municipal-provincial relations when considered in tandem with the introduction of political parties at the municipal level. While political parties will be piloted in Edmonton and Calgary only in 2025, it is likely they will become province wide soon after. This is likely to result in more intense political posturing between municipal and provincial governments when a council is represented by a party that is not aligned with the province. As written, these new powers could be used to undermine the ability of a municipality to operate or individual councillors to serve if they are ideologically opposed to the province. Add to this Bill 18, which allows the province to control a municipality’s ability to receive federal funding without provincial approval, and suddenly the province has plenty of tools to keep municipalities in line politically if they choose to do so.

“Bill 20 is another step in the province’s quest to exert more control over municipalities and centralize local decision-making. Because of provincial fights with a few local leaders, now all municipal councillors must worry about missing out on federal funding, joining a political party, having their local decisions overturned, and possibly being removed from office,” explained McLauchlin. “Our members do so much for this province – we manage nearly all the roads and bridges, make sure land and services are available for industrial development, prepare for and respond to natural disasters, and more. Much of what they do is behind the scenes and goes unnoticed by the public and the provincial government. Rural municipal leaders are okay with that, but when the province actively undermines the ability of our members to serve their communities, we will not sit back and take it.”