



UNLOCKING POTENTIAL THROUGH ADVANCED ASSET MANAGEMENT CAPACITY BUILDING

Case Study: Alberta Asset Management Cohorts

OVERVIEW

From January 2023 to February 2024, 23 municipalities across Alberta embarked on a “*transformative*” – in the words of Bonnyville’s Dru Franklin – journey as participants in the Advanced Asset Management Capacity-Building Cohort, a part of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities’ Municipal Asset Management Program (MAMP): Partners’ Program.

This initiative, driven by the partnership of Alberta Municipalities (ABMunis), Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) and Infrastructure Asset Management Alberta (IAMA), sought to enhance asset management capacity across municipalities through collaboration and applied learning in a team setting.

The cohort participants were dispersed across the province, and so were strategically divided into “*North*” and “*South*” groups based on geography, community size, and asset management maturity levels.

A series of workshops facilitated by Urban Systems’ team of asset management experts provided a platform for municipalities to connect, learn, and mentor one another. The Advanced Cohort was focused on defining and documenting service levels and articulating the true cost of delivery for a service selected by the participating municipality.

This case study focuses on the experiences of the City of Camrose and the MDs of Bonnyville and Willow Creek within this cohort, with the aim of exploring their motivations, experiences, and the overall impact of the cohort on their asset management maturity.

WHY THE COHORT?

Joining the Advanced Cohort was an easy next step for the MD of Bonnyville, as they had already adopted an asset management implementation strategy and roadmap. With Council support, the MD of Bonnyville strategically brought a large, cross-functional team to all workshops, which also proved crucial in mitigating the challenges of staff turnover. As a result, the team remained resilient and made consistent progress throughout the cohort, ensuring that commitment extended beyond individual team members. Virtual and in-person workshops with hands-on activities provided a platform for the different departments to collaborate, offering varied perspectives on risk, budgeting, and asset tracking.

Council support played a crucial role in the MD of Willow Creek’s participation, propelling them to delve into understanding service costs and associated risks with the knowledge that their results would be received well by decision-makers. Asset management appears directly in the MD of Willow Creek’s Strategic Plan, and participation in the Advanced Cohort was one way for the MD to make progress on their stated goals.

A somewhat late-game addition to the Advanced Cohort was the City of Camrose, who had initially signed up for and participated with the Introductory Cohort. Finding themselves a bit out of place with the municipalities just starting to take some first steps, Camrose enthusiastically joined the Advanced Cohort in addition to continued participation with the Introductory Cohort.

Kris Johnson also noted that although team members had completed some initial training which provided context and understanding, the Cohort supported asking questions like, “*What can we take away and start implementing? What processes can we change in our organization to start moving things forward or doing things differently? The cohort helped to start taking the initial steps and created time to actually start working on taking those steps.*”

COHORT APPROACH AND LEARNING:

The MD of Bonnyville emphasized collaborative learning with other municipalities such as the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo and Woodlands County, discussing challenges and sharing insights. The Cohort served as a catalyst, helping the team overcome initial resistance amongst staff, and helped them view asset management not as an additional burden of work but as a valuable tool. This attitude has spread from the Cohort team and is creating a newfound sense of appreciation for asset management in all departments.

Craig Pittman from the MD of Willow Creek stressed the power in numbers that the cohort brought. It showcased that municipalities are not alone in facing challenges and that group buy-in is instrumental in achieving goals. The cohort highlighted the importance of effective communication during changes, especially in what municipalities charge for service, emphasizing the need for gradual progress and for understanding the target audience.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND FUTURE ADVANCEMENTS:

Through participation, municipalities gained valuable insights. The MD of Willow Creek focused on understanding the cost of potable water subsidization and exploring other services and assets like sewer and gravel roads. Pittman also noted the importance of presenting proven service levels to the public in contrast to perceived service levels for better understanding, *“Communication is very important when changing prices for service delivery – if folks can understand internal drivers, they’re more apt to accept price increases. Slow, steady progress towards change is necessary.”*

The MD of Bonnyville observed a notable change in the tone surrounding asset management within their organization. The cohort experience heightened awareness, and now, various departments are actively inquiring about the next steps in their asset management journey. There’s a new enthusiasm and curiosity, creating a positive *“buzz”* throughout the organization that has extended beyond the cohort participation.

The City of Camrose’s team really appreciated the space that the cohort allowed them to dedicate time to advancing asset management initiatives. From the outset of their participation with the Advanced Cohort workshop in Strathmore in April of last year, through the final Risk workshop in Edmonton this February, Camrose has been able to make significant progress on initiatives such as the creation of a formal Steering Committee that meets monthly, as well as a Terms of Reference.

ADVICE FOR OTHERS:

Participants shared valuable advice for municipalities considering capacity-building cohorts. Highlighting especially the importance of active participation, a positive attitude, and knowledge sharing, they encouraged municipalities considering this or other future asset management training opportunities to attend if given the chance.

Value for money in this type of cohort was a key takeaway for the MD of Willow Creek, who underlined that the benefits of developing thoughtful asset management programs far outweigh the costs, *“Good decisions save money... one bad decision can have really large consequences – a small upfront investment can save a lot of money down the line.”*

For Kelly Bakaas of Camrose, having a champion to drive asset management progress is crucial: *“By the time you start the cohort, you should be past fact-finding and answering the ‘Should we be doing asset management’ question, and should be ready to identify someone to drive the initiative forward.”*

In terms of outputs, the Advanced Asset Management Capacity-Building Cohort supported participants in taking tangible steps in defining, documenting, costing, and communicating about service levels. The outcomes included knowledge-sharing opportunities, lasting connections and relationships, and a culture of learning.

The experiences of the City of Camrose and the MDs of Bonnyville and Willow Creek underscore the importance of communication, collaboration, team participation, and ongoing commitment in advancing asset management maturity. As Alberta municipalities continue to embrace these capacity-building initiatives, the future holds promising strides in effective and sustainable asset management practices.