

LEGISLATIVE OVERVIEW

As always, the AMM closely followed both the Federal and Provincial legislative agendas over the last year. While AMM monitored a number of proposed legislative changes, submissions were made on three bills.

Bill C-8: An Act to amend the Canada Transportation Act

Bill C-8 aimed to update the railway transportation section of The Canada Transportation Act and made strides to strengthen the abandonment process. Many communities in Manitoba have felt the negative effects of rail line closures and the AMM is pleased to see this Bill strengthen some aspects of the process for abandonment.

The challenge for municipalities is that the movement of the vast majority of products will not stop just because the rail line is gone. What was once transported on the rail line will now be moved on municipal roads, increasing the pressure on municipal infrastructure. However the impacts of this shift will be difficult to predict as regular traffic patterns will change with the loss of the rail line. As municipalities work diligently to strategically plan infrastructure investments, the changes brought about by rail line abandonment are counterproductive.

We were also pleased to see a commitment from the Federal Government to convene a Level of Service Review. We believe such a review is necessary to deal with the more fundamental issues that fall outside the scope of Bill C-8. Rail lines are critical components of the overall transportation system in Manitoba and across Canada, and it is imperative that they operate at maximum efficiency.

Update: Since the comments on Bill C-8, the Level of Service Review has begun and the committee is currently working on the scope of the terms of reference. The AMM recommended to the committee that the terms of reference include an in-depth review of the overall discontinuance process for rail lines in Canada.

Bill 13: The Highway Traffic Amendment Act

The AMM also provided support for Bill 13 which amended The Highway Traffic Act to allow the Province and municipalities to recover costs as a result of damage to infra-

structure. Since infrastructure is one of the most pressing needs in Manitoba and is increasingly becoming a financial burden for communities, the AMM sees Bill 13 as a positive step. Bill 13 does not provide the funding necessary to deal with the growing municipal infrastructure deficit alone, however it does provide new tools to prevent municipalities from having to pay to fix damaged infrastructure caused by vehicles or vehicle loads. The new tools will allow municipalities to recover costs, which will at least prevent such instances from adding to the growing infrastructure deficit. In many smaller communities, the cost of replacing a structure such as a bridge would have a major impact on their municipal budget. Bill 13 will allow these communities to recover the replacement costs from those responsible.

Since infrastructure ... is increasingly becoming a financial burden for communities, the AMM sees Bill 13 as a positive step.

Update: On June 12th, 2008 Bill 13 received Royal Assent.

Bill 36: The Municipal Assessment Amendment Act

Another bill the AMM commented on was Bill 36, which makes a number of improvements to the assessment system. Of most interest to municipalities is the shift the bill will allow

through regulation to a two year assessment cycle, which is beneficial to municipalities as property taxes are the single largest municipal revenue source. Reducing the time between assessment cycles will provide a more realistic and predictable revenue stream for municipalities. As municipalities look toward addressing the ever-growing municipal infrastructure deficit, a more predictable revenue stream will be required. A two year cycle will also make property taxes more realistic while avoiding the large fluctuations that can exist with the current four year cycle. More frequent assessments will smooth both increases and decreases in property value, removing some of the volatility that is inherent in the current system for both municipalities and taxpayers.

The AMM was also pleased to see included in the Bill the ability for the assessor and taxpayer to come to an agreement on changes to a property's assessment prior to the start of the board of revision process. The Bill also allows the Municipal Board to assist in resolving issues. Finding workable solutions for all parties without having to move into a formal process not only will save time and money, but undoubtedly will benefit community relations.

Update: On June 12th, 2008 Bill 36 received Royal Assent.