

2007 New Council Seminars

answers to your questions

Submitted by Manitoba Intergovernmental Affairs



The New Council Seminars, held in January and February, were a great success, with 436 council members attending, representing 75% of Manitoba municipalities!

These one-day seminars, hosted by Manitoba Intergovernmental Affairs in partnership with the Association of Manitoba Municipalities, were held at nine regional locations throughout the Province. From all accounts, the location, venue, and presentations were well received by those who attended the seminars.

With a primary focus on public accountability and public participation in the decision-making process, seminar topics included conflict of interest, municipal finance and capital planning, emergency preparedness, as well as meeting protocol. Council members had the opportunity to ask questions and share their experiences with others. We appreciated the sometimes quite lively discussions that took place!

Council members expressed interest in receiving additional information on the following topics:

Conflict of Interest

Conflict of interest is a serious matter. Failure to disclose an interest could result in disqualification from office. Councillors will want to be aware that:

- The statement of assets and interests must be completed, no later than November 30 each year by each member of council and updated regularly as changes occur. Although the statement is not available to the public, any person may ask the CAO

to look at the statement on their behalf and advise whether or not a certain asset or interest has been declared.

- When a member of council declares a conflict of interest on a topic on the meeting agenda, the CAO must record the declaration in a central record and the central record is available to the public at any time for inspection.
- Once a conflict of interest has been declared, the member of council must withdraw from the meeting. This means that the member must leave the council chamber, not just the council table until the matter has been discussed and voted on.
- When a council member is absent from a meeting and a topic that he/she has an interest in arises, at the next regular meeting the member must disclose the interest and the disclosure recorded in the central record by the CAO.
- Any gift valued at more than \$250, other than a gift from a family member, must be declared on the statement of assets and interests and if a matter arises at a council meeting pertaining to the donor, the member must declare a conflict of interest and withdraw from the meeting. For example, should a candidate receive campaign funds from someone other than a family member, in the amount of more than \$250, should the candidate be elected and an item involving the donor come before the council, a conflict must be declared and the council member may not vote or participate in any way on the discussions in that regard.

Municipal Finance

Members of council have been elected by their citizens to safeguard the 'purse strings' of the municipality. This is a responsibility that cannot be taken lightly.

- The interim operating budget provides Council with the authority to expend money to operate the municipality until the financial plan is adopted however this interim operating budget does not extend to capital purchases. Should Council be required to make a capital purchase prior to the adoption of the financial plan they must hold a public hearing to advise the public of their intentions.
- Except for emergency situations, a municipality may not make an expenditure unless it has been authorized by the Council. It is therefore important to consider implementing a policy that authorizes certain employees to expend funds up to a pre-approved amount for necessary day to day expenditures – for example – public works foreman for repairs up to a certain amount or the CAO for office supplies up to certain amount. In the absence of a policy adopted by resolution or by-law these expenditures are unauthorized.
- As well, any member of council who expends or invests municipal money without first receiving the approval of Council is guilty of an offence, liable to the municipality for the amount spent, invested or paid, and subject to disqualification from office.
- Council is responsible to ensure that the annual auditor's report is completed

by June 30th of the following year. It is recommended that Council ask the auditor to review the report at a Council meeting, so that the auditor can respond to Council's questions about the report. If the auditor notices any irregularities or discrepancies, it is Council's responsibility to report to the Minister how these matters have or will be addressed.

Meeting Protocol

Meetings require an investment of money, time and effort. As such, it is important that meetings are well-structured, to enable members to exchange information and facilitate decision making.

- Allocate time for each agenda item based on the importance of the item (i.e., 15 minutes to review the accounts for payment and the monthly financial statement, 5 minutes for reviewing informational correspondence, etc.).
- Let delegations know in advance what information council is most interested in and what their presentations should provide. Also, let delegations know in advance how much time they will have, and how the Chair will tell them that time is running out.
- Have different members chair the meeting. This is good not only for variety, but it also encourages more members to develop leadership skills.
- Hold some meetings outside the municipal office council chamber. Try 'field' locations in your community.
- Schedule short breaks frequently. There should be no more than 1.5 to 2 hours of continuous sitting.
- Call on silent members to comment instead of waiting for them to raise their hand.

Intergovernmental Affairs welcomes any additional questions that new (and returning) members of council may have. We also encourage you to take advantage of the many education and networking opportunities that are made available to you throughout your term of office.

Thank you again to those council members who attended the New Council Seminars and for ensuring the seminars were a great success!!

The presentations from the 2007 New Council Seminars are available on the AMM website at http://www.amm.mb.ca/res_presentations.html.

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