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Ron Bell, President

## Spring and budgets are in the air

Spring is in the air and there is a definite current of excitement running through the political landscape. With a municipal election still fresh in our recent memories, to a provincial election that is expected to be just around the corner, to the possibility of a federal election, we are being constantly reminded that the only certainty in life is change.

The recent Federal Budget was widely anticipated to be one of change for municipalities. As with many things, however, sometimes the more things change, the more they stay the same! To address the fiscal imbalance, Budget 2007 provided more than \$39B over seven years. While this is a sizable investment, it is still not a long-term plan that will eliminate the estimated \$60B infrastructure deficit that is the key driver of the municipal fiscal imbalance.

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Manitoba municipal leaders were indeed pleased to hear that the gas tax transfer has been extended for an additional four years at the 2009 level. However, this did fall short of our expectations of a longer-term commitment. A permanent gas tax transfer with an escalator clause is what is needed.

The Federal Budget also included the \$8.8B Building Canada Fund (BCF) that will be allocated to provinces on a per capita basis. This fund is simply a combination, and a slight expansion, of existing infrastructure programs, including the Municipal Rural Infrastructure Fund (MRIF). The BCF will support investments

in the national highway system, large-scale projects such as public transit and sewage treatment infrastructure, and small-scale municipal projects such as cultural and recreational facilities.

Yes, it is positive that the BCF includes funding for investment in cultural and recreational facilities. However, once again, these projects will have to compete for funds against other infrastructure projects such as road repairs. Municipalities will continue to struggle to balance the need to patch potholes with the need to provide facilities that will improve the quality of our lives. What is still needed, yet what remains elusive, is a dedicated fund for municipal recreation infrastructure. (Our special report on *Quality of Life*, beginning on page 25, further explains why this is a priority that we will continue to lobby for.)

While there were other highlights in the Federal Budget (which we summarized in our AMM Members Advisory of March 27), we quickly turned our attention to our own Provincial Budget. The Budget was tabled on April 4, and not surprisingly, contained both highs and lows for municipalities. On the plus side, a promise to increase provincial funding of education to 80% provides a light at the end of what has been a very long tunnel. More police officers and doctors, new environmental initiatives, and the expansion of the successful Neighbourhoods Alive! program are also positive moves.

On the down side, the \$33M committed to infrastructure only scratches the surface without delivering a long-term plan. In addition, we remain concerned with the lack of resources for the implementation of the requirements of *The Water Protection Act*.

While we continue to analyse Budget 2007, you can be sure that the AMM will continue to lobby for positive change for our member municipalities. This effort on your behalf is one thing that will most definitely remain the same. ♡