



# A unique partnership meshes

by Wally Melnyk, CGA, CMMA and MMAA President

In late April of 2003, the MMAA held its 72<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference in Brandon. The organizing committee for the Conference was co-chaired by MMAA District 7 Director **Marna Bulbuck**, CAO for the Town of Roblin and District 1 Director **Brad Coe**, CAO for the RM of Cameron and the Town of Hartney. Marna, Brad and their entire committee of dedicated volunteers must be commended and congratulated for a job well done.

It is interesting how we tend to overlook the benefits we possess, always thinking that things are better somewhere else. This point became very clear to me at our Conference when, on a number of separate occasions, the unique partnership that exists between the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs, AMM and MMAA was recognized and commented on by visitors to the event.

To have a government department, an employee association and an employer asso-

ciation work closely on a variety of issues seemed foreign to the individuals from outside of Manitoba. There is no doubt that the working and professional relationship that is shared by the MMAA, the AMM and Intergovernmental Affairs is unique within the country. Let me assure both AMM and the Department that we don't take our partnership, and our responsibilities within that partnership, for granted.

The Conference had many items of interest on the agenda. Of particular appeal was a panel discussion on municipal amalgamations. Fraternal delegates to the Conference from sister administrators' organizations in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario shared their jurisdiction's experience as it related to municipal amalgamations. In addition, the session had **Joanne King** (CAO for the RM of Gimli) relate a Manitoba example to the group.

The exact nature and motivation for

municipal amalgamations varied across the provinces. The individual stories and experiences varied in detail, although a few summary comments were identifiable. For the three provinces outside of Manitoba, the amalgamation process was accomplished through a variety of initiatives, being driven or at least promoted by senior levels of government. In each of Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan the method may have been different, but the goal was the same – reduce the number of municipal corporations and do it quickly. The result had been a fairly negative, sometimes confrontational, experience for individual municipalities, associations and CAOs that, in Saskatchewan's case at least, didn't work.

In contrast, the Gimli experiment was fairly positive. Ms. King relayed that the provincial role in their amalgamation was more facilitative than authoritative. As such, the two local municipal bodies (the Town and

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RM of Gimli) were able to work with the province to derive a solution that was manageable and acceptable to local politicians, ratepayers and employees.

The moral of the story appears to be that senior government needs to play an advisory and supportive role in the amalgamation process. By doing so, the opportunity exists for local input and buy-in to the ultimate resolution.

Forced amalgamations are politically and socially sensitive issues. The current strategy, evoked by the provincial government to permit local municipalities to decide when, how and with whom the amalgamation should occur, appears to be the right one based on the information provided by the panel at the 2003 MMAA Conference.

The challenge with volunteer amalgamations is uptake. The Gimli example left little doubt that combining of two or more municipalities will provide a benefit to the united municipality in the long term. Factors such as increased competitiveness, improved long-term planning and greater flexibility in attracting development were all mentioned as key benefits from the joining of the RM and Town of Gimli. The responsibility thus lies with the municipalities to ensure that each truly evaluates whether an amalgamation would benefit their ratepayers and residents in the long term.

The Province has stated that it would hope municipalities are looking at a variety of ways to improve their operation. In addition, the AMM, in partnership with Intergovernmental Affairs, has developed the **Municipal Tool Kit** to help councils and administrators determine what, if any, challenges exist in a municipality and how best to address them. It is now up to municipal councils to take advantage of the current spirit of partnership and freedom to choose and honestly, objectively and fairly evaluate the current state of affairs in their municipality. ●

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