



# A look at *Apples and Oranges?* Urban Size and the Municipal-Provincial Relationship

By Tyler MacAfee, AMM Director of Policy & Communications

In case you missed it, municipalities are big news these days. Recent announcements like the Federal New Deal for Communities, or ‘Gas Tax Deal,’ not to mention the GST rebate for municipalities, have put municipal governance front and centre in Canada.

One group that has really focused a great deal of its research on municipalities is the Canada West Foundation, whose mission is to be “A leading source of strategic insight, conducting and communicating non-partisan economic and public policy research of importance to the four western provinces, the territories, and all Canadians.”

One of the group’s major undertakings has been the Western Cities Project that strives to understand “the constellation of issues that must be addressed for our cities to reach their potential and compete with the great cities of world.” As part of this focus, reports on water

conservation, development impacts on the environment, municipal property taxes, and infrastructure deficits have been developed. As well, a great deal of attention has been paid to the relationship between the ‘Western Big Cities’ and their respective provincial governments.

Now the Canada West Foundation has taken the discussion a step further with the recent release of *Apples and Oranges? Urban Size and the Municipal-Provincial Relationship*. This report builds on the Foundation’s work on Provincial-Big Cities relationships and tries to extrapolate the conclusions of its big cities research to smaller municipalities.

The report finds that while there are indeed obvious differences between big cities and smaller municipalities, they are outweighed by the similarities. The report concludes that not only are changes needed to the relation-

ship of big cities and provinces, but so too is there a need for change to the relationship between smaller municipalities and provincial governments.

The report indicates that a ‘one-size fits all’ Canada-wide model will not work, but at the same time a completely different approach for both big and small municipalities will not work either. The Foundation proposes “a more nuanced approach that reverses the polarity of current provincial legislation” which often draws a hard line between big cities and the rest. Instead of treating everyone as a small municipality and giving big cities exemptions, Canada West suggests provincial legislation treat all municipalities as big cities and allow for exceptions for small municipalities, so that everyone gains. By extending the need for new relationships between levels of government to all municipalities, it creates a “best-of-both-worlds solution: an opt-in framework that is flexible enough to enable those municipalities that desire greater autonomy or new fiscal tools in certain areas to adopt them, but one that does not require those municipalities that do not possess the capacity to take on the roles sought by the big cities to abandon the security of their current arrangement”

This report and the work of groups like the Canada West Foundation are important to improving the quality of government, and in the end the quality of life, in Canadian communities. *Apples and Oranges* lays the framework for further research in this area and is a must read for anyone interested in the future of municipal government. ☺

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**AMM members in the know**

Canada West Foundation Senior Policy Analyst **Casey Vander Ploeg** made a presentation on municipal property taxes at the 2005 AMM Municipal Officials Seminar.

At this year’s AMM Convention, CWF President and CEO **Roger Gibbins** presented the findings of the Apples and Oranges report.

Check out the Canada West Foundation website at [www.cwf.ca](http://www.cwf.ca)