



WATER ISSUES

April 2008

Water Issues

Each year the AMM Board of Directors identifies the issues for that year. This year, the AMM Board has identified the current Provincial direction on water-related issues as the number one issue facing municipalities in Manitoba. The AMM is taking this issue to every provincial minister, and it will be the focal point of discussions with the Minister of Finance and with the Premier in our annual meeting. This is also one of the two main issues the AMM is taking to MLAs as part of its Lobby Days. The reason we are taking this issue to all MLAs is to make sure every member of the Manitoba Legislature knows the importance of this issue to municipalities and our primary concerns. We believe this is one of the most important issues facing Manitoba today and we believe it is important that all MLAs understand the significance of the current direction to municipalities.

The AMM has always been a willing partner on water initiatives whenever asked. The AMM was one of the most vocal advocates for the creation of a single department to deal with water initiatives. The AMM has also participated on a number of provincial direction-setting initiatives, including the Manitoba Water Strategy. Municipalities know firsthand the importance of properly managing water and have always been willing to do what is needed. Clean drinking water, safely managed wastewater, and proper drainage and water management are all priorities for municipalities, just as they are for the Province.

Municipalities certainly agree with the Province on the high level goals and visions laid out so far. However it is how the Province is looking to move forward in arriving at these goals that has raised concerns for municipalities.

Throughout the last number of years municipalities have been raising concerns with how all of the new directions announced by the Province will be funded. Most recently the Province released *Framework for the Future*, a discussion document on the future of conservation districts in the province, which is most alarming. Conservation districts (CDs) have become the delivery mechanism of choice for water initiatives in Manitoba, however the funding for CDs has never been equal to the expectations that have been placed upon them. This document advocates for a

scenario where the Province will provide little additional funding, while substantially increasing the expectations for CDs.

One of the greatest strengths of CDs is that they are locally driven, with boards comprised of local residents making decisions based on local priorities. However there is real concern that the proposed changes to the funding mechanisms will seriously erode the importance of local priorities, ultimately leading to the erosion of local authority. This new proposal is to link limited provincial funding with provincial priorities, taking away a local CD's ability to use provincial funding for locally decided priorities. By being forced to use the vast majority of their budget on provincially directed initiatives, there will be nothing left to deal with local priorities. While we certainly expect there to be similarities between provincial and CD priorities, any flexibility in addressing local priorities will be lost.

These are very fundamental issues that need to be discussed and dealt with in order for the CD program to work in Manitoba. However we are very concerned with the approach taken by the department in trying to gain feedback on the document. The questionnaire is misleading in that it does not deal with these fundamental issues, and instead focuses on support for the very general goal statements. We feel the information gained from the questionnaires will only provide part of the picture, while many of the more fundamental issues are not addressed.

The AMM has a long history of working together with the Province, and over the last few years we have worked closely on numerous issues. While we often have differing opinions about what is best, we have been able to work together to find solutions to challenges and with the end result being what is best for all Manitobans. We are hopeful that although the Province has moved forward unilaterally on this initiative, there is still opportunity to find a workable solution that benefits everyone.