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Western Canadian municipalities find common ground

May 23, 2014 - Representatives from the provincial urban and rural municipal associations of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba gathered earlier this week in Winnipeg. The Western Canadian Municipal Association (WCMA) meets annually in one of the jurisdictions to discuss items of common interest.

“It is extremely valuable to find out what is going on in other provinces,” said Doug Dobrowolski, President of the Association of Manitoba Municipalities (AMM). “Often, our experiences mirror those of our counterparts.”

One of the priority topics coming out of the meeting was the National Disaster Mitigation Program (NDMP) being developed by the federal government. The group committed to send a letter expressing concern that this fund not be lumped in with the existing Disaster Financial Assistance (DFA) program. “Municipalities need to be involved in establishing the criteria for this program,” said David Marit, President of the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (SARM).

The New Building Canada Fund was another topic of discussion. Collectively, the group expressed frustration in the delivery of the program details, concern that the 2014 construction season will be delayed, and disappointment with the small community allotment of 10 per cent.

All expressed further frustration that, in each of the three provinces, the provincial governments were given the majority of control over the BCF. “Our organizations represent exactly the same number of people as the provincial governments,” noted Helen Rice, President of the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA).

Each association is actively exploring ways to secure alternative revenue sources to fund infrastructure. “Local governments are facing real challenges, and without new ways to generate infrastructure dollars our economies will suffer,” said Bob Barss, President of the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties (AAMDC).

Debra Button, President of the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association (SUMA), agreed. “It doesn’t matter if the provinces have a ‘planning for growth’ agenda if the communities can’t grow due to a lack of revenue,” she said.

Other items on the agenda included rail safety, by-law enforcement, and natural resources. SARM, AAMDC and AMM updated the group on actions they have taken in their provinces on the current grain movement challenge including lifting of municipal road bans to facilitate product movement. The AMM also highlighted some issues specific to Manitoba, including the cosmetic pesticide ban and municipal amalgamation.

Although the organizations are members of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, it is beneficial to meet as a smaller group from time to time, said Dobrowolski. “Our country is diverse, and in Western Canada, we do have common ground to share,” he explained. “By meeting each year, we can work together to find solutions to issues facing our three provinces.”

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