

Saskatchewan Association of Northern Communities

New North



The Annual Test of Strength & Endurance Known as the New North Waterworks Has “Acceptable” Survival Rate

The Annual New North Waterworks was a highlight of April, with almost 100 people, including municipal and First Nation operators, government officials and sponsors, attending the two day event at PA’s Prince Albert Inn.

The change of venue this year did not keep operators away—in fact, more operators attended than in any previous year. Also for the first time, New North was able to stage the event without the financial help of government, thanks to increased sponsorship from ATAP, Cleartech, Anderson Pumphouse, the OCB and Enviroway.

Operators were able to obtain 1.0 CEU, which they need every two years to maintain their certification. The short courses this year focused on water sample testing and pump maintenance, and ATAP’s all-day session was an A-Z of potable reservoirs. Gripping stuff.

Administrators Conference

We’ve had plenty of inquiries about when this year’s Administrators Conference will be. The short answer is: probably fall. The longer answer is September sometime. The location will most likely be Prince Albert, since we can get a better attendance there. But don’t hold us to that.

New North AGM & Mayor and Councillor Gathering

You’re all probably aware of our upcoming AGM on June 10 and 11 at the PA Inn. Some of the items on the agenda at this point include:

- Wildfire suppression
- Scrap Tire Association (unconfirmed)
- Solid waste management
- Housing
- RCMP, Corrections and Policing
- NORTEP

Although we can’t promise anything yet, we are very confident that a number of ministers will be attending as well. Fingers crossed that works out this time!

The AGM is on the first morning, with the Gathering spanning over the remainder of the first day and into the next.

New North Scholarship

We are pleased to announce that applications for New North’s Leadership and Administration Scholarship are now open.

Last year, three recipients from across the north each received \$1000 to go toward their studies. If you know anyone who might interested in applying, browse to www.newnorthsask.ca, and there you’ll find an application form.

Applications close June 30.



New North’s Sunshyne Charles also picked up 1.0 CEU at this year’s waterworks. Here we see her paying close attention to the ATAP presentation.



The waterworks isn’t all raw sewage and reservoirs. Delegates also enjoyed networking while watching others eat.

The government of Saskatchewan is embarking on a poverty reduction strategy, and consultations are now open. What's the strategy all about, and will it do *anything*?

Although late to the party—given that every province except BC has one—the Saskatchewan government is in the midst of putting together its own poverty reduction strategy.

The advantage of being late, though, is that the province can look at what all the others have done, and perhaps avoid some missteps.

The reason is because poverty reduction strategies generally don't do much, and at best have mixed results. Ontario has managed to reduce the percentage of children living in poverty, mostly by increasing the Child Benefit—although it has not met its target of a 25% reduction—but the poverty rate for adults has skyrocketed.

Manitoba's strategy has largely been a failure, if statistics are anything to go by. In fact, by most measures including food bank usage, poverty has increased there. That province's most recent budget was also criticized for cutting back many of the programs that were aimed at reducing poverty levels, sending the message that a poverty reduction strategy is really only worth doing when the economy is going great. Kind of misses the point, don't you think?

Alberta announced its strategy in 2013, but as of now it is still dead on the table. The municipalities there didn't wait for the province and went about devising their own poverty reduction strategies.

Still, one thing the Saskatchewan government is getting right is holding off on giving the strategy a ridiculous name. Manitoba's "All Aboard" is awful in an endearingly clueless way, while Alberta's "Together we Raise Tomorrow" is just awful.

Generally, poverty reduction strategies at the provincial level focus on the "service" ministries—Social Services, Health, Education and sometimes Justice. In our case, it is Social Services leading the way.

Advocates would like to see a focus on increasing social investment. "Social investment" can include things like childcare places, rent assistance, and nutrition supplements—things you wouldn't see in an economic growth plan, but can be very important in helping break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Hand-outs like child benefits and increases to social assistance and the minimum wage can obviously help as well, but are more problematic because of the possibility of entrenching people within the welfare state.

Ideally, of course, a genuine poverty reduction strategy would also be an income redistribution strategy. However, we can easily see how such a strategy could ultimately undermine economic growth and job creation.

Poverty Reduction in the North

We all know that poverty rates in the north are higher than anywhere else in Saskatchewan. It is unlikely that we will see anything that will be particularly northern-focused coming out of the consultations. But if we could have something that was, what would it look like? Here's our stab at a few ideas.

1. Let's start with nutrition. Report upon report has documented the high cost of living in the north. When you combine the very limited choice and the very high cost of purchasing nutritious food in the north, you have a recipe not only for poor health outcomes, but for poor childhood developmental outcomes as well. We'd like to see a transport subsidy program aimed at reducing the cost of basic food and other necessary items.

Saskatchewan's Poverty Reduction Strategy

FACT BOX

Key Priority areas of the Saskatchewan Poverty Reduction Strategy

Income security

Housing

Early childhood

Education, skills and training

Health

Poverty Rates in Saskatchewan as measured by Income

1 in 10 people live below the poverty line, as determined by the Low Income Cut-Offs (LICO)

Poverty Rates in Northern Saskatchewan?

A lot higher than that

2. Rolling-back of the income-to-rent ratios for social housing. We have seen an increase in displacement in the north as a result of the squeeze put on social housing tenants by Sask Housing. Although aimed at capturing high-income earners still living in social housing (which is a good objective), it has had the effect of forcing many families to down-size, often into trailer homes, condos or a shared-housing situation.

3. Direct-payment of childcare subsidies to providers

State-sponsored childcare coverage is an abomination generally—and the provincial budget actually decreased spaces recently—but in the north it is also a very nice cottage industry for stay at home moms. However, childcare is still very unaffordable to many. A lack of childcare affects those who are most likely to be born, grow-up and die in poverty—aboriginal females. A direct subsidy provided to a sole-provider could not only protect the childcare cottage-industry—which, again, provides a decent income for many women—but also make childcare affordable for a greater number of families, enabling a greater number of women to go back to school or to get back into the workforce.

4. Increase the minimum wage and make adjustments to social assistance annually to better reflect northern cost of living

Enough said.

5. Greater allocation of resources toward mental health, homelessness and support for FASD in the north. We got to keep making this recommendation, it seems.

Unlike in some other provinces, municipalities in Saskatchewan have a fairly limited role in delivering social, health or education services.

This is actually a good thing, as the municipal sector can focus on the things it is good at.

Even so, it is worth thinking about the ways that municipalities can and do contribute to poverty reduction.

Policies Around Tax Abatement and Collection

Municipalities can abate property taxes in exceptional circumstances. Generally, taxes are abated because of financial hardship, and municipalities abate more readily for home-owners than businesses. When abating taxes, municipalities are recognizing the importance of the home as a cornerstone of family life. Provincial legislation makes it very difficult for municipalities to take possession of title, and for good reason. So, when a municipality instead decides to take other kinds of property, it should as a matter of policy be mindful of taking a possession that could effect a person's livelihood. Taking someone's car, for instance, is not a good idea. Taking their TV, on the other hand ...

Fees for Water, Sewer and Landfills

It is generally accepted practice in Saskatchewan that fees for utilities should reflect the cost of operating, maintaining and replacing the utility. This is not the case in the north. Because the cost of running the utilities is so high, municipalities actually have quite a balancing act in figuring out how much they should be charging property owners for their use—given that the Northern Operating Grants are there to buffer home-owners against the full cost. Because there is no “market signal” to set the price of a utility's services, municipalities can actually set service charges that reflect the socio-economic challenges of the community—if they choose to do so.

Expanding Mandates

The unconditional nature of the Northern Operating Grants give the northern municipalities room to expand their mandates. For instance, some municipalities see to it that housing needs in their community are being met by engaging in the construction and operation of housing units.

Co-ordinating with other Agencies

Many municipalities play a co-ordinating and planning role with agencies that provide social services, such as community based organizations, volunteer groups, churches, as well as other levels of government.

the MUNICIPAL SECTOR and poverty reduction

Have Your Say If you would like to contribute to the consultations, go to: <http://gos.fluidsurveys.com/surveys/eccs/poverty-reduction-survey/>

In Depth SUPREME COURT 1, Prayer 0 in Extra

Supreme Court decision prohibits prayer at municipal meetings. What does it mean?

If you're an avid constitutional scholar like us, or maybe you just picked up a newspaper in April, you may have noticed the Supreme Court's decision in *Mouvement laïque québécois v. Saguenay (City)*.

The decision was that prayer at council meetings violates the Charter of Rights, specifically those rights relating to freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. Following the decision, many municipal governments around the country sent out news releases saying that they would no longer open their meetings with a prayer. The City of Regina is one example.

The Premier, Hon. Brad Wall, said the ruling doesn't apply to provincial governments, although many legal scholars would disagree with him. So, what's it all about? How can a ruling that prohibits religious expression also be about religious freedom?

Let's take a look at the reasoning behind the decision. The judges said the following:

“The state’s duty of religious neutrality results from an evolving interpretation of freedom of conscience and religion. The evolution of Canadian society has given rise to a concept of this neutrality according to which the state must not interfere in religion and beliefs.”

In other words, the “state”—which means government—is not allowed to promote one kind of religious practice over another. This reflects an important doctrine of modern western democracy—the separation of Church and State. In this regard, the judges said that the governments must always be careful to:

“neither favour nor hinder any particular belief, and the same holds true for non-belief...”

Democracy is based on the idea that everyone has an equal right to participate in the democratic process, and governments have a responsibility to “encourage everyone to participate freely in public life regardless of their beliefs.” What this means is that the government

“may not use its powers in such a way as to promote the participation of certain believers or non-believers in public life to the detriment of others.”

The saying of prayer to open a council meeting, or at any time, was considered by the Supreme Court to be same as if the government were endorsing one form of religious expression over another. As the court said:

“If the state adheres to a form of religious expression under the guise of cultural or historical reality or heritage, it breaches its duty of neutrality.”

Many in the Christian community felt that this ruling by the Supreme Court was anti-Christian. That is not the case. What the ruling does is simply affirm the idea that government and religion should not mix.

Back home, political reality means that the prayer will not be banished from the provincial legislature. Brad Wall, in fact, made a very good joke that if anyone needs the help of God, it is politicians.

But we should also think about the principle that is at stake here. In the late 19th century, governments across Canada banned many Aboriginal religious and spiritual ceremonies, including the potlatch. The justification for banning these ceremonies was because they were not compatible with Christian religious practices.

The principle reaffirmed by the Supreme Court means that governments will never be able to ban a religious practice again—remember, because of the doctrine that governments and religion should not mix. It means that governments cannot make laws about religion—except laws that promote the idea that all religious practices are created equal. It means that when a government practices a particular religious expression—even something as seemingly trivial as a prayer—it is by that very act endorsing that particular religious expression over another.

At the end of the day, this issue is not really about religion at all. It is about the Supreme Court and the Charter of Rights. If we believe in the Charter, and we value the Supreme Court, then we need to respect what they say. You cannot pick and choose which sections of the Charter to follow. And when the Supreme Court spells out its position on a particular section, that position has the effect of being law. The Supreme Court has spoken its thoughts on the appropriateness of prayer at government meetings, and whether we agree with it or not, the principle has been established.

Changes to Legislation to Tighten Conflict of Interest Provisions for Municipal Councillors

- **The fall-out from the Inquiry into the RM of Sherwood Park continues, with the provincial government beginning its consultation with the municipal sector on implementing some of the recommendations of the Barkly Report.**
- **Expect Legislative Changes by Fall**

If you recall, last year Justice Barkly was brought in by the Minister of Government Relations to investigate community concerns in the RM of Sherwood Park about a property development called Wascana Village. During the investigation Justice Barkly became aware of possible misbehaviour by the Reeve of the RM. The inquiry was expanded to investigate whether the Reeve was in a conflict of interest in his handling of the project, given that it was his land that was being developed.

All in all, the successful completion of the Wascana Village development would have netted the Reeve more than \$50 million.

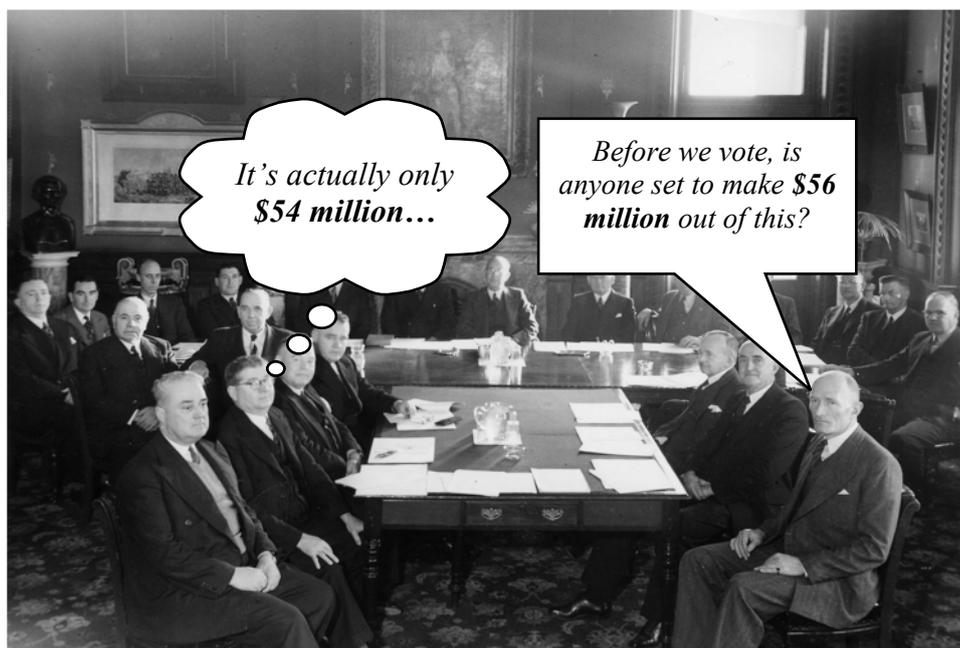
Out of that Inquiry came a report, called the Barkly Report. Among the recommendations from the report that government is looking into are the following:

- Mandatory public disclosure statements for councillors
- When a councillor declares a conflict of interest, the details of the conflict need to be recorded in council minutes
- Mandatory Code of Ethics Statements for councillors
- Disqualification period for councillors removed by the minister for conflict of interest violations for 3 terms of office

Municipal Ombudsman?

Although not a part of the government's recommendations at this point, the Barkly Report also suggested that the role of the Ombudsman's office be expanded to encompass conflict of interest complaints and queries from the municipal sector. Interestingly, the RM of Sherwood Park itself argued for the need

for an Ombudsman, whose role would partly be to act like a kind of "referee" to determine when and if a conflict of interest has occurred or could potentially occur. You see, the issue in the RM of Sherwood Park was not that no one knew about the Reeve's interest in the development—everyone knew he stood to make a lot of money. Rather, the issue was what actions by the Reeve *constituted* a conflict of interest given the circumstances. The Reeve got legal advice—which turned out to be poor advice—that all



he had to do was not vote in council meetings on the issue to avoid a conflict, because that is all that the legislation required

He was dead wrong, of course. While he tried to hide behind the letter of the law (the legislation)—and used that law as his defence—he didn't comprehend the "common law" obligation that you still have to act ethically (in other words, impartially) when in public office., and that actions that can influence the administration of municipal government to further private interest is just as unethical as if casting a vote in council. The recommendations of Justice Barkly will at least partly bring the statute law (the various municipalities acts) in-line with common law principles, making the obligations of councillors more transparent.

The changes to the various municipalities acts are expected to occur in the fall, which will mean that these provisions should be in place before the next municipal elections in 2016.

Upcoming New North Events
New North AGM/Mayor & Councillor Gathering
 June 10th-11th, Prince Albert Inn

From the CEO, Al Loke

Doug Elliott’s SaskTrends Monitor has one set of statistics that appear to make no sense when you first look at it: on one hand, northern Saskatchewan has a high birth rate. On the other hand, population growth in our communities is stagnant.

How can this be?

The answer is simple: very high rates of intra-provincial migration. In other words, our youth are moving away. Of course, there is nothing wrong with young people wanting to spread their wings and see the rest of the world. In fact, the best thing we can do for our kids is give them the resources and teach them to be resilient out there in strange new places.

The problem is not that our youth are leaving. The problem is that when they go, they don’t come back.

And we all know why. Jobs.

Statistically, job growth has been very good in the north in recent years. But that growth comes from a very shallow base. After a big jump, mainly from mining, job growth has slowed down.

Anyway, not everyone wants to work in a mine. A poorly diversified northern economy means that we will always experience the boom/bust of commodity price cycles much harder than anyone else.

For all the talk about population growth and record job growth in this province, the reality is that the north is not growing nearly as fast as the south.

Free and Easy Suduko!

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New North Executive

Chair: Mayor Georgina Jolibois — West

Board Members:

Councillor Al Sayn (Vice Chair) — Far North

Mayor Gordon Stomp, Village of Air Ronge—Central region

Mayor Val Deschambeault — Eastern Region

Duane Favel—Member at Large

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New North Mission Statement

New North - SANC Services Inc. (Saskatchewan Association of Northern Communities) through strength in unity is organized to advocate, negotiate and initiate, improvements for the interests and concerns to the Local, Provincial and Federal Governments to enhance the quality of life for Northern people within the Northern Administration District (NAD) of Saskatchewan.