



COVID-19



REGIONAL CONFERENCE CALL SUMMARY

MNL coordinated a series of 5 regional conference calls for members to share information, ask questions and comment on best practices as we move through this difficult time.

The calls were chaired by MNL CEO, Craig Pollett, and included Len LeRiche, President and CEO of SafetyNL, Professional Municipal Administrators (PMA) and the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Fire Services.

Each call included an introduction to the purpose of the call. Len LeRiche provided an update on the provincial status of COVID-19, including the declaration of the Provincial Public Health Emergency and the broad powers it provides to enforce recommended actions. He shared the current national circumstances, case numbers, and national regulatory actions such as the border being closed to most travelers while still allowing for trade goods movement. He concluded with a brief rundown of the latest COVID-19 occurrence statistics reported by public health authorities for Canada and Newfoundland and Labrador.

Craig Pollett provided a briefing on MNL COVID-19 actions to date, which include establishing a COVID-19 web page on the MNL site; organizing the regional calls; providing regular updates through email and social media to members; and, providing solutions to members based upon the questions and problems that they are facing.

The call proceeded with a roundtable. A designated spokesperson shared information on behalf of the municipality.



PUBLIC FACILITIES AND EVENTS

Most municipalities had closed indoor public facilities and postponed or cancelled upcoming public events. Some outdoor public facilities were still open at the time of the calls. They have since closed. Questions about how long this situation would last, and therefore impact local community events, were common.



OPERATIONAL – MUNICIPAL OFFICE

Most municipal offices were closed to the public, or in the process of closing and/or offering reduced services. Where possible and practical, municipal office staff were working at home, or were in the process of transitioning to a work-from-home model.



OPERATIONAL – ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Essential services (solid waste, snow clearing, water testing, wastewater management) were in operation. Recycling was suspended in larger municipalities; smaller municipalities were seeking advice on recycling. Municipalities were, in general, maintaining essential service staff on rotations, staggered shifts or on-call. For essential staff working on site, staff safety protocols including social distancing were in place. Smaller municipalities expressed concern regarding potential staff shortages.



PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS

All municipalities reported actively communicating with their residents through means such as social media, mail-based flyers and newsletters, community channels, or the radio. Not all municipalities have crisis communication plans in place. Support for communication was requested in some instances.



EMERGENCY PLANNING AND PREPAREDNESS

Most municipalities indicated that they had emergency plans, and that they had reviewed them, or were in the process of reviewing and/or updating. Pandemic was not part of most emergency plans.



COUNCIL MEETINGS

Councils were in the process of establishing how to conduct council business moving forward and were looking for direction and assistance on this. Some had postponed meetings, awaiting further direction.



BUSINESS CONTINUITY

Not all municipalities have business continuity plans. For those without such plans, they were seeking guidance and support specific to residential and business taxation extensions and collections, and operations.



FINANCIAL

Municipal financial sustainability was a concern, specifically the status of municipal operating grants, other potential financial aid to municipalities (or lack of mention thereof in other aid packages). More information on current and upcoming infrastructure project funding was requested.



SAFETY

Leaders expressed concern about the safety and well-being of their residents, particularly seniors; their staff, and their firefighters, most of whom are volunteers. Many referred to an anxiety present among staff and residents. Questions about personal protective equipment for firefighters was a common topic; as well as a lack of available hand sanitizer. Proper office cleaning protocols were noted. Almost all regions reported concerns about individuals not self-isolating after return from travel.

REGIONAL HIGHLIGHTS AND NOTED CONCERNS

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12 representatives of large and urban municipalities met on March 18.

Notes include:

- The need to ensure that Federal Government economic stimulus is easily accessible by municipalities and residents, and that information on programs is provided quickly;
- The need to ensure that province's capital works programming and municipal project design work continues to move, so that things are shovel ready to assist recovery;
- The need for a common position on tax breaks and other financial relief provisions;
- The impact of this situation on the business community and municipal resources, especially on the Northeast Avalon (as a result of the January snowstorm);
- Establishing a shared document on COVID-19 period human resource management issues and sample policies;
- Creating positive messaging to residents that business continuity is occurring;
- Larger municipalities on the Northeast Avalon are working together.

91 representatives from Avalon Eastern municipalities joined a call on March 18.

Notes include:

- Concerns around office co-location (some municipal offices are shared with other tenants not yet closed to the public, e.g. post office);
- Joint emergency planning with neighbouring towns was underway, but strong recommendations to regionally organize and coordinate;
- Numerous references to outreach, especially for vulnerable community members;
- Food security considerations – not all communities have local food banks, bulk-buying provisions or social support plans;
- Most volunteer community support organizations also shutting (churches, clubs), reducing capacity;
- Encouragement to plan for the worst-case scenario, e.g. supply chain breakdowns, rationing.

48 representatives joined a call for the central region on March 19.

Notes include:

- Reference to innovative means to connect with residents, including video;
- Coordinated community approach. Municipalities are working with local service clubs and organizations to plan and address needs;
- While churches are no longer holding services for residents, some are streaming live;
- Concern for the large numbers of seniors living in their communities;
- Solutions around home-based delivery on the part of smaller grocers.

32 representatives joined a call for the western region on March 19.

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Notes include:

- Desire for human resource policies to guide municipalities;
- Need for direction on proper sanitizing procedures for portable water dispensing units (PWDUs);
- Concerns around co-location (some municipal offices are shared with other tenants);
- Concerns regarding personal protective equipment (PPE) for firefighters and protocols for volunteer firefighters to respond to calls where COVID-19 risks may be present;
- Concern over the availability and distribution of food and fuel for more remote areas.

32 representatives joined a call for the Labrador and Northern Peninsula region on March 19.

Notes include:

- Early March mobilizing on the part of Inuit Community Governments (ICG) and some other communities in Labrador, often engaging full slate of emergency operations centre representatives in preliminary planning.
- Substantial joint emergency planning and communications coordinated with neighbouring towns, and strong recommendations to regionally organize and coordinate if at all possible;
- While most towns lack pandemic response scenarios in their current emergency plans, some do have them and are happy to share this information.
- Food security considerations – grocery deliveries, local firewood and food-sharing, and social support plans exist in numerous communities (i.e. North Coast ICGs); dedicated early-hour shopping arrangements for elder and immune-compromised.
- Several references to targeted outreach for vulnerable community members, especially elder residents, e.g. Senior's Hotline, volunteer lists.
- Concerns with transiting workers and residents.
- Limited policing coverage outside of largest municipalities to address recognized issues with travelers not complying with self-isolation directives.
- The unique circumstances of the North Coast ICG require urgent attention: enforcement capacity is lacking there to ensure public health directives are followed, and the remote Nunatsiavut region health facilities and staff are at especially high risk of being overwhelmed if community transmission occurs.

Thank you to everyone who completed our online survey. Approximately 150 municipal councillors and staff responded in a very short turnaround and for that we are grateful. The majority of respondents expressed significant concerns for the safety and wellbeing of residents and staff, as well as senior populations. You also communicated concerns regarding viral spread and containment.

In closing MNL urges you to be vigilant, keep the lines of communication open with your residents, council and neighbouring communities, listen to the public health authorities and take care of yourselves. Remember we are all in this together and MNL is here to support you.