



March 26, 2020

Honourable Derrick Bragg, Minister
Department of Municipal Affairs and Environment
4th Floor, West Block
Confederation Building
PO Box 8700
St. John's, NL A1B 4J6

Dear Minister Bragg:

Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador (MNL) is working closely with its members to understand their concerns, share information, and to find solutions to the problems that they face as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. On behalf of our board and staff, I want to acknowledge the support and close relationship that we have maintained with the staff in your department. It is essential during this time and the lines of communication are open.

Last week, MNL hosted 5 regional calls and issued a survey to members on their responses to COVID-19. Over 150 people responded to the survey; over 200 people joined our calls, representing 166 municipalities. Our members are demonstrating leadership. They quickly closed their facilities and offices to the public; provisions are in place to ensure the safety and security of municipal staff. Our members are working with local partners; they are communicating with their residents and they are worried for the safety of their staff and vulnerable residents in their community. They also have concerns and questions. These concerns require the immediate attention of the department as we work through the next days and weeks:


1. Municipal financial sustainability is a key concern. Our members are asking that municipal operating grants and any other unconditional funding be released as soon as possible.
2. Our members, and our larger municipalities, want to know about the status of infrastructure funding approved for project starts this year. What is the plan for approved project work and can design work commence? Our members want projects to be shovel ready for when we are all able to go back to work. They agree that this is an important part of economic stimulus and rebound.
3. Most councils will not be able to bring auditors in for quite a while. Can deadlines for audits be extended?
4. Staffing is a challenge for smaller municipalities. Essential and technical staff, such as water operators, are few. Our members are concerned should their staff become ill and unable to ensure the continuance of essential service delivery in their community. Does the department have guidance and a plan in such an instance when essential services can no longer be maintained in a community because of this situation?

5. Many of our members are concerned about food security and supplies, such as fuel, in their communities. This is particularly worrisome for smaller, remote areas and island municipalities like Wabana and Ramea. What assurances and information can your department provide them with respect to food security and secure essential supply chains?
6. As of December 2019, 29 municipalities (and 3 LSDs) had portable water dispensing units (PWDUs) in their communities. They are facing unique challenges in terms of public access and disinfection. They require immediate guidelines on handling these PWDUs given the COVID-19 situation. Safe drinking water will, more broadly, become a concern if supply chains and staff become at risk in this situation. Once again, we require information from the department on what the plan is for this and how it will be handled should we encounter an even more unprecedented situation than the one we are in now.
7. Many municipalities are requesting loan payment deferrals from their banks. While the banks are agreeing to these deferrals, there is concern that some of the deferred payments will go beyond the deadline for repayment required in the funding agreement from MAE. Can you provide flexibility to municipalities whose deferrals extend beyond their repayment deadlines?

I want to express my thanks to you and your staff for the quick responses we've already received on issues like the conducting of council meetings. Timely and clear guidance to the sector is critically important during this crisis and we appreciate your attention to these important issues.

We look forward to continuing to work closely with you on these issues and other issues as they arise.

Sincerely,



Sheila Fitzgerald
President

Cc/ Dan Michielsen, Deputy Minister (Acting)