

Advocacy Report

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2020 has been a time of tremendous challenge and change. Throughout it all, MNL advocacy has been steadfast to continue to work on priorities that matter to members. This advocacy report focuses on five areas of concentration throughout 2020: COVID-19 supports to municipalities, municipal fiscal stability, regionalization, innovative municipal infrastructure, and a seat at the table. This report addresses each briefly, and concludes with commentary on the continued advocacy required in these areas and others moving forward.

COVID-19

Since the COVID-19 global pandemic was announced in March 2020, MNL engaged significantly with the sector to facilitate conversation, to share and gather information, and to answer questions. Throughout 2020, MNL hosted 6 rounds of regional calls with members. We issued four surveys covering: initial concerns, COVID-19 impacts, PPE and a leadership and wellness check in with members of the women's caucus. We received well over 250 COVID-19 specific emails from municipal councillors and staff. We did two follow up rounds of interviewing with members related to the impacts of COVID-19 on municipalities.

As a result of this engagement and collective advocacy with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), MNL ensured that municipalities had access to over \$27 million in operational funding under the Federal Safe Restart funding agreement with the province. MNL advocated to the province that this funding should be flexible, easy to access and easily distributed. The province followed these recommendations. Safe restart funding was allocated directly to municipalities on a per capita basis in November. MNL worked closely with the provincial government to make sure that municipal operating grant funding flowed easily and quickly, and that municipal-specific guidance related to COVID-19 was available.

In April 2021, MNL released the summation of our COVID-19 impacts research with four recommendations:

- Municipalities need access to operational and infrastructure funding streams to support ongoing operational needs related to COVID-19 and to support recovery;
- All funding streams should be flexible and allow for stacking;
- All funding streams should be without administrative burden;
- All funding streams be designed and delivered as multi-year funding opportunities.

Municipal fiscal stability

While COVID-19 is a reality which no one could have anticipated, it is an amplifier. The needs identified, coming out of the pandemic are the needs that were already there. Now they are in plain view. To this end, advocacy throughout 2020 and in to 2021 concentrates on the need for municipal fiscal stability. Multi-year funding, flexible funding opportunities and less administrative burden are all aspects of a municipal fiscal future envisioned by MNL.

Through the Municipal Solutions Platform, released at the onset of the provincial general election, MNL further advocated for a stable fiscal reality for the municipal sector. The focus here is on municipal fiscal reform. Property tax is the main source of municipal revenue in this province. Property tax alone cannot cover the rising cost of operations and infrastructure in a province with an aging and declining population. Municipalities need access to additional sources of revenue. Small changes in provincial fiscal policies can have a big impact on municipal fiscal stability.



Regionalization

Newfoundland and Labrador lacks a modern municipal system. Regionalization makes it possible for communities to come together to share costs, services and to have a stronger voice together. In some cases, it can mean establishing a regional government. MNL has been working on its regionalization advocacy for over a decade. The establishment of the Regionalization Working Group with the Department of Municipal and Provincial Affairs and the Professional Municipal Administrators marks an important step in moving this work forward. The group has been meeting regularly since fall 2020 and weekly throughout 2021. The group is working toward the creation of a set of recommendations for implementation to bring forward to the provincial government through the minister.

Innovative municipal infrastructure

Municipalities have the responsibility for 60 percent of Canada's infrastructure but access to only 10 cents on every tax dollar. Municipalities in Newfoundland and Labrador are facing an infrastructure crisis that requires right-sized innovative solutions that make sense for the community realities in our communities. Any approach going forward requires a clear plan on asset management and an environment that is creative and not risk averse.

MNL's successful advocacy to reopen the Wastewater Systems Effluent Regulations means that there is more time to do the innovative work necessary for right-sized wastewater systems. Access to increased multi-year flexible funding to support municipal infrastructure such as that available through Canada Community-Building Fund is a good start to achieving the kind of opportunities that we need.

A Seat at the Table

Municipal issues are provincial issues. Municipalities are the heart of our province. They are at the heart of recovery. MNL's advocacy is underpinned by the position that municipalities always need a seat at the decision-making table. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, MNL worked hard to ensure that your voice was represented and heard. MNL worked with provincial ministers and federal MPs to advocate for funding, for support and for information. Municipal COVID-19 specific guidance, responsive flexible funding and access to provincial health and regional health board networks would not have been possible without asserting municipal voices at the table.

Advocacy in to 2021

Into 2021, advocacy for municipal fiscal stability and for flexible multi-year infrastructure funding will continue. Work on understanding the ongoing pandemic impacts for municipalities will be a priority. MNL will continue to ask and advocate for what you need to empower your work. MNL will continue to advocate for much needed change in the sector, including updating the *Municipal Elections Act* and ensuring the new *Municipalities Act* comes into effect.

Fall 2021 is municipal election time. MNL envisions the municipal sector as a place where people see themselves politically and a place where people want to work. This is only possible when it is a welcoming space where people feel that they can and do belong. The Make Your Mark Campaign, WelcomeNL and work to ensure members have the right tools and information to carry out safe and inclusive elections are all part of these efforts. MNL looks forward to updating members again on advocacy in November.