

COVID-safe and Accessible Elections 2021 – A Municipal Framework

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for safe, inclusive and accessible elections. The fall 2021 municipal elections are no exception. MNL and Professional Municipal Administrators (PMA) are working together with the Department of Municipal and Provincial Affairs (MAPA) to ensure municipalities and their staff are aware of all options for voters, and that they can put processes in place to hold elections that include “mail-in” voting. It is hoped that the experience we gain this year will greatly facilitate a constructive, multi-stakeholder process, and otherwise lay the groundwork to inform where we can make changes in the future, legislatively or otherwise.

In partnership with PMA, MNL has undertaken a review of national recommendations and lessons learned from other COVID-period elections. Input was also received from municipal election staff and concerned organizations regarding election-related issues, information needs and preferences of municipalities here.

Arising themes and core needs coming through in the consultations argued for a 2021 municipal election planning process that, as much as possible within the scope of the current *Act* and alert level in force, will:

- Broaden timeframes;
- Provide for options; and,
- Provide supports.

To this end, MNL and PMA recommend that – as outlined by the MAPA Circular (14 April) on the topic - **towns seek Ministerial approval for the use of a mail-in ballot**. This will afford the greatest available flexibility under the current *Act* with respect to both lengthening the time available to complete the voting process, as well as allowing for contingency plans should a return to a COVID-related lockdown in all or part of the Province occur during the election period. A toolkit is being compiled, starting with templates for the request letter and Council resolution (see **Timeline** below) that municipalities will require in order to complete this first key stage of their COVID-safe election planning. Templates for the necessary *Vote By Mail Regulations* and other guidance materials will follow.

Next, MNL and PMA are inviting all towns to participate in a **coordinated countdown to Municipal Elections 2021**. In tandem with our *Make Your Mark* campaign encouraging more people to consider standing for municipal office, MNL will stage a series of online events addressed to the phased preparations for a COVID-safe election – everything from preparing the voters list to educating residents on how the mail-in ballot process works. A dedicated COVID-safe election page will also be maintained on the MNL website for ready access to FAQ, downloadable materials, archived video and other important election-related information.

MNL and PMA are working closely with the Coalition of Persons with Disabilities (COD-NL) and other representative and service organizations across the Province to provide a further series of **resources and supports that will assist municipalities** in overcoming barriers their local processes are presenting to some voters. Inclusivity and electoral access are issues that pre-date COVID; may one of the legacies of this election be that we learn how to do better.

Finally, MNL is reviewing our standard **group purchasing** program to identify other materials that may be added to the typical offerings (e.g. voting screens, ballot boxes) to support a COVID-safe election.