



January 29, 2026

Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada
Rural Team
235 Queen Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H5

Via email: rural@ised-isde.gc.ca and publicopinionresearch-recherchesurlopinionpublique@ised-isde.gc.ca

Re: Rural Development Action Plan Consultation

To Whom It May Concern,

On behalf of the Association of Manitoba Municipalities (AMM), we appreciate the opportunity to provide input to Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED) as part of the public consultation to develop an Action Plan for Rural Canada.

While the AMM represents all 137 municipalities in Manitoba, the majority of our members are rural in nature and face unique challenges related to geography, population density, infrastructure deficits, climate impacts, and limited fiscal and administrative capacity. As such, we welcome the federal government's commitment to develop an Action Plan on rural issues and recognizes the importance of this initiative for communities across Manitoba and Canada.

The AMM supports and echoes the themes and recommendations advanced by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) in its submission to this consultation. In particular, we wish to underscore the critical importance of flexible, responsive federal programming; sustained investment in municipal water and wastewater infrastructure; accelerated expansion of broadband connectivity and essential cellular service in rural communities; public safety, bail reform, and rural policing capacity; and enhanced support for rail safety and grade crossings.

Flexible and Responsive Federal Programming

A central concern consistently raised by Manitoba municipalities is the need for federal programs that are designed with sufficient flexibility to reflect regional and jurisdictional differences. One-size-fits-all approaches often fail to account for the realities of rural communities, including limited administrative capacity, smaller tax bases, remoteness, and higher per-capita service delivery costs.

Therefore, the AMM encourages the federal government to design rural-focused programs that include flexible eligibility criteria, scalable funding thresholds, and cost-sharing requirements that do not disadvantage small or remote municipalities. Predictable, multi-year funding and early municipal engagement in program design are essential to ensure that federal investments are both accessible and effective. Without these considerations, well-intentioned programs risk being underutilized or misaligned with local priorities.



Increased Investment in Critical Municipal Water and Wastewater Infrastructure

Reliable municipal water and wastewater systems are fundamental to public health, environmental protection, housing development, and economic growth in rural communities. Across Manitoba, many municipal systems are aging and increasingly unable to meet regulatory requirements or support future growth without significant rehabilitation, upgrades, or replacement.

The AMM has consistently identified municipal water and wastewater infrastructure as a top federal priority. Rural municipalities face disproportionately high per-capita infrastructure costs, mounting regulatory pressures, climate-related risks such as flooding and drought, and limited local fiscal capacity. Together, these factors have contributed to a growing infrastructure deficit that municipalities cannot address without sustained federal partnership.

The scale of need in Manitoba is both significant and immediate. Municipalities outside the City of Winnipeg have identified **more than 300 shovel-ready water and wastewater projects**, representing over **\$1.35 billion** in required investment to upgrade or construct treatment facilities and sewer infrastructure. These projects are critical not only to maintaining existing services, but also to enabling housing development, supporting economic growth, and attracting investment in rural communities.

It is important to note that federal housing programs and objectives will be unlikely to succeed in Manitoba without parallel investments in municipal water and wastewater infrastructure. Simply put, one cannot build a house without running water or a flushing toilet. Federal housing programs must be flexible and designed to reflect the realities of each jurisdiction, rather than being modeled solely on conditions in major metropolitan centres such as Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver. Without alignment between housing objectives and municipal infrastructure capacity, investment in housing will be constrained and inequities between regions will widen.

As such, the AMM cannot overstate the importance of coordinated action across all orders of government. Investment in municipal water and wastewater infrastructure represents the single largest infrastructure demand constraining Manitoba's growth potential. Federal, provincial, and territorial governments must work collaboratively to align funding programs, regulatory requirements, and timelines in order to address this urgent and expanding deficit.

As part of the Rural Canada Action Plan, AMM recommends that the federal government commit to predictable, long-term, and flexible funding for municipal water and wastewater infrastructure, with support for rehabilitation, renewal, and system expansion. Programs should also support asset management planning and capacity-building initiatives for small and rural municipalities to ensure the long-term sustainability of these essential systems.

Broadband Connectivity and Essential Cellular Service

High-quality broadband and reliable cellular service are essential infrastructure for rural communities and a prerequisite for economic development, access to health care and education, effective emergency response, and overall quality of life. In Manitoba, persistent connectivity gaps continue to place rural and remote communities at a significant disadvantage. These challenges were further underscored during last year's devastating wildfire season and evacuation of 32,000+ Manitobans.



Despite federal investments over the years, these gaps remain largely unaddressed. Federal programs such as the Universal Broadband Fund (UBF) have, in the AMM's view, had limited impact on improving broadband connectivity for municipal Manitoba. Of the \$3.225 billion allocated to the UBF, only one municipal-led project in Manitoba has successfully received funding to our knowledge. This outcome is deeply concerning, particularly given that Manitoba consistently ranks among the provinces with the slowest internet speeds in Canada and that many rural communities have been advocating for improved connectivity for years—if not decades.

The AMM supports FCM's call for accelerated and more effective action to close the digital divide. Rural communities must have access to broadband speeds and service reliability that meet or exceed national targets. Equally important is comprehensive and reliable cellular coverage along highways, within communities, and across agricultural and resource areas, which is critical to public safety, economic productivity, and emergency communications.

To achieve these outcomes, federal investments must prioritize underserved and hard-to-reach areas where market forces alone are insufficient. Program design and timelines must reflect the urgency of rural connectivity challenges. In addition, the AMM notes that current CRTC connectivity maps often misrepresent on-the-ground realities in Manitoba, creating a false picture of service availability and hindering effective investment decisions. Accurate data must underpin federal policy and funding to ensure resources are directed to communities with the greatest need.

Public Safety, Bail Reform, and Rural Policing Capacity

Public safety is a foundational requirement for rural economic development, community well-being, and population retention. Across Manitoba, municipalities are increasingly concerned about rising levels of violent crime, repeat offending, and insufficient policing capacity—issues that disproportionately impact rural, northern, and remote communities.

The AMM supports the federal government's efforts to strengthen Canada's bail framework and **supports Bill C-14** as a necessary step to help restore balance to the justice system. Municipal leaders, frontline responders, and residents continue to express concern that the current bail regime too often results in repeat violent offenders being released back into communities, placing public safety at risk and undermining confidence in the justice system. Rural municipalities, which frequently lack nearby policing, judicial, and social service resources, are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of repeat offending.

At the same time, Manitoba faces a critical policing capacity challenge. The province currently has the **highest provincial RCMP vacancy rate in Canada**, leaving many rural detachments understaffed and unable to meet community needs. Chronic vacancies translate into longer response times, reduced proactive policing, officer burnout, and increased reliance on limited municipal resources. These challenges are exacerbated by vast geographic service areas, difficult travel conditions, and the growing complexity of policing in rural and remote environments.

Public safety concerns also intersect with broader rural development objectives. Communities experiencing persistent crime and inadequate policing face barriers to attracting investment, retaining residents, supporting local businesses, and advancing housing development. Without a strong federal role in justice reform and rural policing capacity, these challenges will continue to undermine the long-term sustainability of rural communities. The AMM appreciates the commitment to hire 1,000 new RCMP officers for federal policing, although we have received confirmation that none of these potential officers will be dedicated to community contract policing, which is very disappointing.



As part of the Rural Canada Action Plan, the AMM recommends that the federal government:

- *Advance and strengthen bail reform, including through the passage and effective implementation of Bill C-14, to ensure that public safety and the risk posed by repeat violent offenders are given appropriate weight in bail decisions.*
- *Work collaboratively with provinces, territories, and municipalities to monitor the impacts of bail reform on rural and northern communities and ensure that legislative changes translate into meaningful on-the-ground improvements.*
- *Address RCMP staffing shortages in Manitoba as a matter of urgency, with targeted federal action to reduce vacancy rates, improve recruitment and retention, and stabilize rural detachment staffing levels.*
- *Ensure rural policing models are adequately resourced to reflect the realities of large geographic coverage areas, limited backup availability, and increased service demands in rural and remote communities.*
- *Recognize public safety and policing capacity as essential enablers of rural development, and integrate justice and public safety considerations into broader federal rural, housing, and economic development strategies.*

Strengthening public safety, ensuring effective bail policies, and restoring adequate policing capacity are essential to building resilient rural communities. Without these foundational supports, investments in infrastructure, housing, and economic development will not fully achieve their intended outcomes.

Rail Safety and Grade Crossings

Rail safety and the condition of railway grade crossings represent a growing concern for rural municipalities across Manitoba and Canada. There are approximately 14,000 public and 9,000 private grade crossings across more than 40,000 kilometres of federally regulated rail lines, many of which intersect rural roads that are essential for agriculture, resource industries, emergency services, and daily travel. Amendments to federal grade crossings regulations have appropriately prioritized risk-based compliance; however, the financial burden associated with meeting these requirements continues to far exceed the resources available to municipalities.

Current funding available through the federal Rail Safety Improvement Program (RSIP) represents only a small fraction of the total investment required to bring grade crossings into compliance. Individual crossing upgrades can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and in some cases exceed \$800,000—costs that are simply unmanageable for many rural municipalities given their limited tax base and legal requirement to balance budgets annually. Municipalities own and manage approximately 60 per cent of public infrastructure in Canada while receiving less than 10 cents of every tax dollar, underscoring the urgent need for greater federal participation in funding safety-critical infrastructure that arises from federal regulatory obligations.

In addition to increased investment, municipalities require a more transparent and accountable framework governing communication with railway companies. Road authorities and railways share responsibility for grade crossing maintenance and repairs, yet there is currently no legislated requirement for meaningful consultation before railway work is undertaken that may result in significant municipal financial liability. Too often, municipalities receive little or no advance notice, are not provided with multiple cost estimates, and are presented with invoices that lack clarity or justification. As part of the Rural Canada Action Plan, the AMM urges the federal government to significantly increase RSIP funding and to establish clear regulatory requirements for proactive communication, consultation, and



cost transparency from railway companies, ensuring municipalities can plan responsibly and protect limited public resources while maintaining public safety.

AMM sponsored resolutions to FCM can be found at the following links:

- <https://fcmresolutions.powerappsportals.com/en-US/ResolutionDetails/?id=9507e0f3-13b7-ef11-a72f-6045bd601348&return=%2Fen-US%2FResolutions%2F%3Fkeyword%3D%26amp%3Byears%3D2024>
- <https://fcmresolutions.powerappsportals.com/en-US/ResolutionDetails/?id=3842f060-7bba-f011-bbd3-7c1e525312c3&return=%2Fen-US%2FResolutions%2F%3Fkeyword%3D>

Concluding Comments

In closing, the AMM welcomes the federal government's efforts to advance a meaningful and actionable Rural Canada Action Plan. By embedding flexibility into program design, investing in critical municipal infrastructure, and treating broadband and cellular service as essential infrastructure, the federal government can help ensure that rural communities are resilient, competitive, and positioned for long-term success.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments. The AMM looks forward to continued collaboration with ISED and other federal departments and would welcome further engagement as the Action Plan is developed and implemented.

Sincerely,

Denys Volkov
Executive Director

cc: Hon. Buckley Belanger, Secretary of State (Rural Development)
Hon. Gregor Robertson, Minister of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities
Hon. Rebecca Chartrand, Minister of Northern and Arctic Affairs, Minister responsible for the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency
Hon. Eleanor Olszewski, Minister responsible for Prairies Economic Development Canada
Hon. Glen Simard, Minister of Municipal and Northern Relations (Manitoba)
Hon. Jamie Moses, Minister of Minister of Business, Mining, Trade and Job Creation (Manitoba)
Rebecca Bligh, FCM President