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Presentation

Bill 33: The Municipal Modernization Act

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The Association of Manitoba Municipalities would like to state our views on **Bill 33: The Municipal Modernization Act**.

Bill 33 would require any municipality with fewer than 1,000 residents to amalgamate with another municipality with whom it shares a boundary.

The AMM has enjoyed a long and mutually respectful relationship with Manitoba Local Government.

This relationship has been recognized at the national level by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and other provincial associations as one of the best in Canada.

However, we are concerned the Provincial Government is choosing a path that will destroy this relationship and respect for years to come.

Our members have expressed many concerns since the Province of Manitoba announced its intentions to force amalgamations.

Although some members support amalgamation and some do not, it is our position that the decision to amalgamate should rest with the municipal government and its residents.

The AMM is not opposed to amalgamation. What we are opposed to is forcing our members to choose a path that may not be right for their community.

Beyond the forced aspect of this Bill, our members have numerous other concerns.

- First, the proposed timeline of January 1, 2015 is unreasonable. We believe successful amalgamations occur at a pace that is comfortable for all parties, including the citizens of the affected municipalities. Forcing amalgamations is undemocratic, and forcing them within a tight time period causes additional, unnecessary stress on everyone involved.

- The bill does allow the Minister to extend the timeline for amalgamation to a date no later than January 1, 2019, as long as an amalgamation plan has been submitted by the deadline specified. However, we believe there is little potential for flexibility in the bill. It is completely at the discretion of the Minister.
- Furthermore, we believe the use of the 1,000 citizen threshold to determine who must amalgamate is not only an artificial number but an inaccurate one. We are aware of many municipalities currently under this population that function at a very high level.
- We are also very concerned with the proposed elimination of public input through the Municipal Board. Although the Bill states that amalgamating municipalities must provide “a reasonable opportunity for members of the public to comment,” there is no requirement to involve the Municipal Board. The Bill does not mention what would happen if members of the public are opposed to amalgamation.
- Finally, although Bill 33 includes provisions to initially keep all policing arrangements the same despite any amalgamations, the AMM has concerns about how this will work in practice. Where one amalgamating municipality has its own police force or is policed by the RCMP, a new arrangement will have to be made within three years. If a new arrangement is not made after the three years to have one police service for the amalgamated municipality, the Minister will enter into an agreement with the RCMP to provide policing for that municipality.

Overall the legislation is very prescriptive to municipalities, including those with populations over 1,000. Because the legislation requires neighbouring municipalities to work cooperatively with those under 1,000 many more municipalities might in fact be affected, regardless of their population.

There is also the fact that, despite numerous discussions with Minister Lemieux and his staff around this issue, to date the Province has been neither unable to demonstrate any definitive evidence that money will be saved after amalgamation, nor that quality of life for citizens will increase.

In fact, there is evidence that costs will go up. A study by the C.D. Howe Institute suggests that “small municipalities contract for services with their neighbours, private suppliers, or other providers when it is cost effective to do so, and provide services themselves when it is less costly.”

The same study goes on to state that amalgamation “tends to eliminate the very characteristics of local government that are critical to successful low cost operations.”

Municipal leaders already receive low remuneration as compared to their federal and provincial counterparts. They contribute countless hours to serve their communities because they are PART of these communities.

Many of them are not interested in becoming elected officials who will end up costing their citizens more money while covering larger areas.

As stated earlier, the AMM is not opposed to amalgamation. We have seen cases where discussion has begun and municipalities are moving forward on this initiative.

However, we have also seen situations emerging where the threat of forced amalgamation is tearing communities apart who have built their partnerships over the last few decades. Some municipalities have consulted with their citizens who also oppose amalgamation.

In the interest of preserving our good relationship with the government and in ensuring our members retain their ability to make decisions based on the needs of the citizens who elected them, we have proposed the following compromises:

1. First, we believe the Province should take the time to assess the viability and sustainability of communities at the current funding levels. The AMM would be pleased to have a role in this assessment, perhaps by enhancing the Tools for Change document jointly developed by the AMM and Manitoba Local Government.
2. Second, we ask that the Province eliminate the 1,000 threshold requirement, as this is an artificial number that does not reflect the reality of municipalities in Manitoba;

3. Third, we ask that the Province provide all the support necessary to those who are ready to amalgamate before the next municipal election. We know there are discussions taking place and a number of municipalities are working toward this goal. Monitoring the progress of these early mergers, highlighting their successes, and allowing these municipalities to lead by example will lighten the load on everyone while at the same time encouraging those who may be hesitant.
4. Finally, we recommend the Province work with those Manitoba municipalities that are struggling to be sustainable on acceptable timelines that will result in better service in their communities. Again, the AMM would be willing to participate in a joint committee with the Province to achieve this.

In summary, we respectfully request your consideration of our presentation and the will of our membership.

We sincerely hope it's not too late to find a compromise regarding this issue.

Because at the end of the day, Bill 33 is about much more than finding ways to become more efficient or save money.

It is about considering the fabric of communities that are the homes and birthplaces of many thousands of Manitobans.

It is about listening to the people who have built their livelihoods, raised their families, and served their communities with honour and integrity over years, decades and in some cases, centuries.

It is about respecting and recognizing the abilities and the value of another elected order of government, not dictating to it.

Unfortunately, Bill 33 has done none of those things.

What it has done is increase the stress levels of hard working municipal councils.

It has caused anxiety amongst the citizens who have devoted their lives to creating safe, healthy, and vibrant communities.

And what it still threatens to do is damage – possibly beyond repair – the relationship between our two orders of government.

All with the stroke of a pen.

Rather than taking a thoughtful and collaborative approach, the government is pushing this through without considering the people whom it will affect the most. Why? And more importantly - why now? Why rush something so monumental that it will change the landscape of our province forever?

We have asked that question repeatedly and received no answer. Yet the government expects us to believe that Bill 33 was created to bring us together.

In reality, it is tearing us apart.

Please reconsider the forced amalgamation of municipalities.