

Alberta Urban Municipalities Association

Keynote Address

Calgary, AB

November 6, 2009

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I would like to congratulate the newly elected leaders.

You have an important task before you, and I know you will rise to the occasion.

The challenging times we are facing, demand strong, consistent leadership to provide much-needed stability.

You are all leaders, in a time when leadership is needed more than ever.

In the past few years, I have watched many of you extend hands to your neighbours, drawn by the opportunity to be a part of something bigger.

Armed with the understanding that only by working together, can we achieve the vision we share.

Our vision is of a stronger Alberta.

One where every person, will live in a strong, safe, community with the services they need, expect and deserve.

Services like top quality health care, seniors' benefits, and a world class education system.

We have strong foundations in place we have a common vision to follow, and we have a leader with a plan to take us there.

Thanks to our Premier's thoughtful, consistent leadership, we have planned for and prepared for times like we are facing now.

He shares our vision and as you heard yesterday, his plan to achieve it is straight forward and unwavering.

First, we need to return the province to a surplus in three years.

Second, we need to use our cash reserves to help us deliver on core public services.

Third, we must continue to invest in infrastructure like roads, water treatment facilities, and libraries.

And finally, we must make sure Alberta's industries can compete globally and attract investment. We need to sell Alberta.

We need promote the Alberta brand, to show the world that Alberta is a great place for investment; immigration; employment; and tourism.

And – Alberta is a place of strong, vibrant and caring communities.

Each of us has a unique role to play to make this plan work and achieve our goal for Alberta.

My role is to work with you to ensure the sustainability of our province's municipalities.

I eat, sleep and breathe my mandate, and so do my staff.

For three years, I have been talking with you, listening to you, and bringing your priorities forward on our government's agenda.

You told me municipalities needed predictable, long-term funding.

You got it.

The funding being provided to your municipalities through MSI is our Premier's commitment to you.

The only string attached is a responsibility to spend it wisely.

The Premier wanted this to be strategic funding.

So, I knew it was critical to set it up so it wasn't just to buy a carton of milk for the fridge – it was to renovate the kitchen.

I suggested some incentives for cost sharing and administration to help ensure the funding was being spent wisely.

I learned a valuable lesson that day.

I was reminded of his wisdom and that he's our leader for a good reason.

He took me aside and he said to me: "Ray, this idea sounds great and I can see how it's going to make life better for a lot of Albertans. But we need to remember that local matters are best decided locally. Give municipalities autonomy."

What he told me two and a half years ago, is exactly the same thing he said to you yesterday.

He also said: "With secure, direct funding, their leaders will do their best to co-operate and make the right decisions for the people living in their communities."

He told me not to tie up the funding with incentives and administration.

But instead, to develop a shared vision with you for the future of municipalities.

So, with that common vision, we could all work together to leave a legacy of strong, sustainable communities for generations to come.

He was right.

After many open and frank discussions with your association, I am seeing more and more of you signing on to this vision and leading MSI projects that are enhancing entire regions.

The momentum that is being created is an exciting thing to be a part of.

For example, the Town of Raymond and the Village of Stirling are combining their MSI funds to build a regional water treatment plant to benefit both communities.

Bashaw, Camrose County and Ponoka are working together to modernize Bashaw's Community Hall, which people from miles around will use and enjoy.

These are perfect examples of what can be accomplished when we put our differences aside and work together.

A year ago I told you I had some concerns with how these programs were going.

But I want to say the improvement has been nothing short of incredible.

The MSI funding has been like a breath of fresh air for many of our communities.

In addition to free flow sewer systems, I am seeing dynamic community halls, bustling recreational centres, and libraries standing strong as cornerstones of their communities – inviting people from all around to gather, to learn, and to expand their horizons.

The Albertans living in these communities are enjoying a world-class quality of life.

Our Premier sees it too.

That is why he remains unwavering in his commitment to provide the full funding through MSI.

Only you can take responsibility for the long-term viability of your municipalities.

I have no doubt that each of you wants what is best for the communities you represent.

But I cannot overlook the fact that each municipality has a different capacity to deliver on that.

Even with the unprecedented MSI funding, some communities are still not able to provide basic fundamental services for their residents.

The vision we have for Alberta is better than that.

To deliver on our vision, the Premier has asked me to come up with a strategy for municipal sustainability.

One that will ensure all Albertans, regardless of what municipality they live in, will receive the basic services and programs they rely on and deserve.

I have created a team within my ministry to specify what basic services all municipalities are expected to provide for their residents.

With that, we will determine what capacity building tools are required and what restructuring process is necessary to ensure the sustainability of our municipalities.

Your organization recently presented me with a detailed paper outlining your ideas for the future of local governance.

I appreciate the work that has gone into this report and I really hope that your association will decide to work with us to incorporate some of these ideas into our strategy.

I know we will achieve a better result if we work together.

The inter-municipal partnership between the Town of Peace River and Northern Sunrise County is a perfect example of what can be accomplished when you put your differences aside and work together.

These regions have developed a long-term cost sharing agreement for important programs and services that residents from both municipalities enjoy like: the library, the museum, recreation programs, parks, and family and community support services.

This initiative is an outstanding example of what can be done when you focus on the future and put the needs of the ratepayers first.

That's exactly what the City of Red Deer and Red Deer County have done recently.

Another good example of the importance of regional co-operation is what I have been seeing lately with Summer Villages.

I'll be honest with you, a year ago their future was uncertain, but by taking responsibility for the sustainability of their communities, and by working together, they have, in essence, saved themselves.

This and this alone is allowing them to shape their future rather than allowing the future to shape them.

As leaders, each of us has the responsibility to put our individual interests' aside and work for the betterment of the people we represent.

That's why I want to thank you for being open and honest with me and for bringing your ideas to the table.

I am asking you to continue to use me, because I am your avenue to the Province and representation for your municipalities is going to come from me.

During my recent municipal tour, many of you voiced concerns to me about the private member's bill coming forward, calling for a municipal auditor.

I had the opportunity to speak on your behalf when this Bill was discussed at the Policy Field Committee earlier this week.

I reinforced the fact that you, as municipal leaders, already strongly support and believe in accountability for your constituents.

That is why Alberta is known for its accountable and transparent local governments.

Because I understood and shared your concerns, I explained that the creation of a municipal auditor could potentially have the unwanted effect of duplicating existing powers and procedures and limiting your local autonomy.

I know that as local leaders, you are committed to reducing duplication, sharing costs, and further increasing accountability to your taxpayers.

And I know that if there is a way to improve financial practices – and make them more transparent – then you would want to hear about it.

So that's why, I suggested the principles of Bill 202 could be accomplished in different ways, such as: adopting cyclical Municipal Corporate Reviews; requiring management letters be made public; better public access to information; and ensuring the independence of municipal auditors.

Together, these initiatives will go a long way in showing Albertans exactly how their tax dollars are being spent.

I don't know what the end result will be for this Bill, but I do know that your concerns have been heard and they are being considered by the committee.

You have also told me that finding and applying for 77 municipal grants across 13 ministries is too complicated and not an efficient use of your resources.

So, we are taking action to change that and to make it easier.

The feedback you provide to me is invaluable and it has helped me help you in many ways.

A few years ago, we came together and took an honest, hard look at the health of Alberta's communities.

I think all of us realised that maintaining the status quo could result in the end of a way of life.

That small-town Alberta, with its unique traditions, colourful heritage and welcoming people, would slowly fade away into the pages of our history.

We also realized that our major urban centres needed to work more closely together to identify common priorities that would allow them to continue to provide the quality of life their citizens deserve.

The challenges are different but there is one common theme and that is that we need to work together.

With that realization, we came together as leaders and began the work of preserving the foundations of Alberta's communities.

We began delivering on our vision to build a stronger Alberta.

We have come a long way since then.

The plans we have made, the initiatives we have discussed, the projects we have begun, have been the building blocks for our vision.

Together, we are making Alberta a province that offers its citizens the best of all possible worlds.

No matter what they want from life - wide open spaces; safe, strong communities; or world-class cities.

That is Alberta.

That is the Alberta we are building, together.

That is the Alberta we love.

Thank you.

