



Saskatchewan Municipal Employees Steering Committee

2021 Saskatchewan Municipal Employees Steering Committee Report to the Annual Conference

The Saskatchewan Municipal Employees Steering Committee is committed to providing efforts to reflect a positive image of municipal employees in the community as well as promoting the safety and wellbeing of the 6000 employees it represents. It ensures the interests of members are represented through coordinated bargaining and it promotes the many great services municipal employees proudly provide and deliver in their respective communities. We are the political arm and collective voice of 39 municipal locals which consist of 14 cities, 18 towns and 2 villages.

It's been a busy year for the committee. Shortly after the last MESC conference, we began to see the effect the pandemic was having on our employees. New PPE and social distancing protocols were being introduced, workers who could work from home were asked to work from home. Some workers were asked to reduce the number of hours they worked in a week while others were permanently or temporarily laid off. The MESC responded by holding all Presidents meetings in order to do a "check in" and see how everyone was doing. The meetings were well attended and were met with praise. We came together to share information, bounce ideas off each other and give support to one another.

We also began to hold monthly meetings at this time to plan for the CUPE Western Municipal Conference combined with our next annual MESC conference. The original plan was to have both in Regina as that came with cost savings. We tendered out the facility along with accommodations and the Double Tree in Regina came out on top. Contracts were signed and deposits were put down. Unfortunately, in January we decided to opt out of those contracts and go with a virtual format as the pandemic was still present with little to no letup predicted for the next six months.

Along with organizing the conferences, we developed a \$24,000 cost share with CUPE National. Most of the funds from this will go into billboard advertising and a digital ad campaign with 15 second non-exitable messages promoting municipal workers on You Tube, Facebook and Instagram. The intent of this would be to raise the profile of and eliminate the stigmas attached to municipal workers.

In the months prior to the municipal elections held in November, the committee worked alongside CUPE Communications Officer Tria Donaldson to come up with a questionnaire email for all candidates to answer in order to gauge how “labour friendly” they were. From that questionnaire a list of favorable prospects was established with help from the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour and local district labour councils. I feel we were successful with that; one must look no further than the City of Prince Albert with Tony Head as their councilor for Ward 3 and the City of Regina with Cheryl Stadnichuck as their councilor for Ward 1.

In June, CUPE National President Mark Hancock wrote a letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to ask about municipal funding, as municipalities are not allowed to go into a deficit. Trudeau’s reply was that the federal government will be helping municipalities, however; the money will be going towards infrastructure and not operating budgets. In response to this, Judy Henley and I sent a letter to or provincial Minister of Government Relations, Lori Carr, calling for emergency operating funding for municipalities.

The main issue of concern for us remains to be P3s as they make the delivery of public services more complicated, inefficient and dangerous. The Sask Party government has shown a preference for Design-Build-Finance-Maintain style of P3s and some of these contracts last up to 30 years, according to Simon Enoch of the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives. He says “We’ve all heard the horrors of hospital and school projects. P3 maintenance contracts sow confusion and uncertainty over maintenance responsibilities in P3 facilities, create inefficiencies in decision making and put workers and users at risk because of flaws in the design and build phase.”

Another issue of concern was the Sask Party government’s decision last March to remove the two-week layoff notice required by employers from the Saskatchewan Employment Act. Our Division President Judy Henley said “...this will create more stress and uncertainty for families during what is

already a difficult time. Thousands of workers have already been laid off and this government wants to make it easier for companies to issue more layoff notices. It is absolutely unacceptable.”

Around this time the Sask Party also introduced the Self Isolation Support Program, which is overly restrictive and only allows workers a mere \$450/week for a max of two weeks. This simply does not go far enough.

The provincial budget that came down in June did little to address the large deficits seen in municipalities. A couple examples would be the City of Regina with a \$21M deficit and the City of Saskatoon with a \$32M shortfall.

There are challenges around every corner in our sector. How many of us have started the workday and something has come up that changed our plans? We have developed the ability to adapt and change direction on the fly. Our problem-solving and logistics skills are tested to the full while our customers may not be impacted or even be aware of current situations. I am proud to say that I work in this sector that is full of amazing, dedicated professionals. Creative individuals who always find a way to make things happen.

In Solidarity,
Rick Sielski