

Mayor Deb Higgins Column February 07, 2014.

This past week, I along with a number of Councillors, had the opportunity to attend the 109th Annual Convention of the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association. The Convention held this year in Regina, is an excellent opportunity to network with members of municipal councils from across the province, attend educational sessions and workshops, and participate in discussions with Cabinet Ministers from various provincial ministries.

Educational sessions and workshops are based on current issues and included: Today's Saskatchewan, which dealt with the provinces changing demographics and the impact of immigration on our communities. From 2007 to 2012, 43,000 new immigrants settled in Saskatchewan and by the year 2030, it is projected that immigration will account for all population growth. Clearly, how we welcome newcomers to our communities is important to the future growth and success of our city.

The session on Privacy Legislation and Council walked delegates through privacy legislation that applies to municipal governments explaining what information could be considered private and how to make decisions about what can and cannot be released. Important information when we deal with many issues that are considered confidential.

Other sessions discussed Recreation Collaboration, the Urban Environment and Dealing with Solid Waste, Managing Roadway Risk, Planning and Development, and Communications with Residents. All topics relevant to Moose Jaw and information we can apply to future activities in the city.

We also attended a number of breakout sessions that were directed at specific issues relevant to cities. At one of these sessions, we heard from Mario Lefebvre, CEO of the Quebec Urban Development Institute and former Director for Municipal Studies at the Conference Board of Canada. He spoke of the critical role that cities play in growing our province. Cities invest \$1.2 billion per year in the economy; they attract more than 77 per cent of all new immigrants, and 60 per cent of the province's population lives in our cities. If we add the population of towns and villages, that number would increase to 82 per cent of the province's total population. The success and growth of cities is an indicator of the future growth and success of the province.

The Convention also dealt with a number of resolutions. One in particular expressed the need on behalf of all municipalities, for long term predictable infrastructure funding to support building for new growth and rebuilding aging infrastructure. The resolution, which passed unanimously, called on the federal government to release, as soon as possible, the guidelines for future infrastructure programs so municipalities could prepare and be "shovel ready" as soon as a new program begins.

Railway safety was also a topic of discussion and the subject of a resolution that SUMA, through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, continues to lobby and work with the federal government to improve regulations and enforcement of rail safety standards. Recent incidents have raised concern as to current safety standards and work will continue on the national level.

We also heard from Premier Wall who floated a new proposal in his speech to the Convention that the education portion of property tax may be increased to support infrastructure projects. While the comment was a surprise to all in attendance, it was not well received. We probably won't know how serious his comment was until the release of the provincial budget in March but we've been down this road before and I can't imagine such an increase being well received.

Overall, it was a good opportunity to meet and discuss municipal issues with our counterparts from across the province.

Deb Higgins
Mayor