

# Trends Shaping Future for Canadian Municipalities

As another year closes, municipal councils across the country are gearing up for an intense, difficult 2013.

In some provinces and territories, new councils are being sworn in after the fall election cycle; in most communities, the annual budget document is about to come thumping down on the desks of councillors; in communities large and small across Canada, the vital, complex issues of infrastructure renewal; finding new, sustainable non-property tax-based revenue; and continuing to grow the community's jobs and prosperity are just some of the major issues confronting councils.

## Changing World

Communities grow or decline; a storied past is no guarantee of a prosperous future. That is the tough reality for municipal leaders in Canada and around the world. The world is changing, and new trends, policies, and opportunities are emerging.

It is always difficult for municipal officials to balance the extremely local needs of residents – garbage collection, barking dogs, neighbourhood playgrounds – with the much larger issues that are increasingly the focus of forward-thinking councils: building communities that are appealing to the bright young grads and entrepreneurs; global competitiveness; maintaining a strong financial base in the face of new demands for spending; and improving the community's quality of life.

Government is not static. Issues and outside influences are always shifting the foundation. The public is getting more demanding and less tolerant of

poor quality governance. If you can't engage local residents, you risk losing their hearts and minds. Municipalities haven't always done a very good job of that engagement.

Young people, in particular, don't have time for issues that are not emotionally connected to their hearts; social media is changing how we perceive and respond to community issues and global threats. It is a very different playing field today for mayors, councillors, and administration, but many of them haven't recognized or understood this new business, community, and social environment.

## The Global Context

While it seems a paradox that the most local of our elected governments today must consider international events and economics, the reality and the trend is that the local council needs to better understand its community's role in the world.

Local leaders must comprehend how international events, social trends, financial markets, cultural tendencies and shifts, environmental advances and crises, demographic changes, technology and innovation, wealth creation, and the influence of broad social change and movements are impacting their local communities and, inevitably, their local decisions.

While economic realities run through everything governments do today, there is also an appropriate place for human, cultural, social, and societal trends to be contemplated. This cannot be forgotten by municipal councils in their debates about building their

communities. It is not always about the money. A civil society and a great quality of life are also important for people; and, at the end of the day, it is people who make up our communities.

The chart on page 8 is a greatly-simplified summary of my views of the big shifts and changes in the political/economic/social/cultural world of government. It is intended to be a thought-starter for discussion and debate.

If municipalities are going to determine their long-term prosperity and success, then they will need to understand and address these changes in our society, our country, and our world. These shifts can't be ignored, as comforting as that might be. Towns and cities have this tsunami of change coming at them, yet still some councillors are fretting about chickens in backyards.

## Seize Your Destiny

Municipalities in Canada have a very unique moment in time to seize their destiny. We have the opportunity to build and reshape glorious cities and comfortable towns that offer residents the best quality of life in the world, and the economic opportunity and prosperity to match and support that quality of life.



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## TOP 20 CHANGES IN MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT FOCUS AND APPROACH

Issue	Yesterday	Today	Tomorrow
1. Property taxes	Tax them	Tight budgets, unhappy taxpayers, greater demands for services	Three choices: doing more with more, more with less, or less with less
2. Attitudes toward civic government	Respectful	Distrustful of all governments	Regain public trust
3. Civic projects and service delivery	Tightly controlled	Public-private partnerships	More new and outside partnerships with business and community groups
4. Communication	Minimal public outreach	Effort to reach out	Open, honest two-way communication using new and social media, with city hall as trusted source
5. Management structure	Strictly hierarchical	Flattened management structure	Flexible administration system
6. Technology	Slow to embrace	IT department rule	New communication and information systems will change how cities function
7. Economic development	Fight your neighbours	Regional partners / thinking	Global strategic planning
8. Unions	Strong union presence	More private sector	Weakened union influence
9. Revenue generation	Property taxes	Property taxes	New sustainable revenue sources
10. Financial status of city	Secure, comfortable	Threats to fiscal sustainability	Greater concern over on-going economic viability
11. Business regulations	Tight, inflexible	Transition time ...	More open business climate, flexible approach to business needs
12. Public safety (police, fire ...)	Sacrosanct	Growing concern about cost	Changes in arbitration system and alternative service delivery will force changes in spending
13. Working at city hall	Rigid rules for employees	Desire for innovation	No silos, many staff working at home, self-managing, smaller core staff at city hall
14. Community - building	Narrow focus, protective	Respond to community wants	Building a creative city for future
15. Social structure	WASP	Multi-cultural	Cosmopolitan Canada
16. Public pensions	Pensions for life	Public resentment	Reform of "gold" pension system
17. Employment	Jobs for life	Boomers retiring as big changes hit city hall	Accommodate needs of new, younger workers
18. Innovation agenda	Same old, same old ...	Community engagement	Constant change and improvement becomes routine at city hall
19. Public engagement / outreach	Minimal	Effort to reach out	Develop community partnership approach with resident
20. Political clout	Federal	Provincial	Municipal

If the opportunity is lost, then we risk communities falling behind and facing a declining quality of life. Much of the difference between winners and losers in these municipal battles – and understand clearly, there will be winners and losers – will be determined by our local elected and appointed officials,

through the decisions they make and the paths they choose to follow.

This interaction with local citizens, this opportunity to help shape your local community, is what sets local government apart from all other orders of government. There are direct and relatively immediate connections and results. You

can take on city hall, and win ... that's what people have figured out.

If all politics are local, then local is where the decisions are made and the impact is most apparent. That is also why local government will become the most important order of government for most people most of the time. *MW*

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