



NOVA SCOTIA FEDERATION  
OF MUNICIPALITIES

## Advice for Federal Election Candidates: **Go Local**

*By Juanita Spencer*

If all politics are local politics, then federal election candidates need to get back to their grassroots and acknowledge the role municipalities play in serving all Canadians.

Although most candidates will echo the line that “municipal government is the one closest to the people,” their parties need to provide municipalities with the tools they need to fulfill their responsibilities on their own.

In Nova Scotia, 50 municipal governments represent almost a million people.

Their 379 mayors, wardens and councillors make decisions on the frontlines daily on projects and programs that directly impact their residents’ lives.

Municipalities from Sydney to Yarmouth pave the roads, maintain the bridges and keep the wastewater systems running so our towns and communities can remain operational.

Those projects aren’t sexy; they don’t grab the headlines or create quick photo-ops for *twitter* and Facebook.

But they’re essential to the smooth functioning of our cities and nation, and they are very expensive to install and maintain.

Municipalities own close to 60% of this public infrastructure but receive just eight cents of every tax dollar collected, limited primarily to property taxes and user fees.

There are federal infrastructure funding programs available, but often they're underutilized because the applications require a level of staff capacity that many small municipalities lack.

In a survey of our members done over the summer, 72% of respondents said that infrastructure funding is their biggest federal concern.

So, we're calling on candidates running in next month's election to commit to providing support to organizations like NSFM so we can work with our small and rural municipalities to access much-needed infrastructure funding.

**The Gas Tax Fund (GTF)** is a great example of a successful federal-municipal partnership: It's a stable, predictable, and easy-to-manage source of infrastructure funding.

Other federal programs aren't as straightforward because they require provincial matching funds or administrative approvals.

NSFM wants other federal funds like the **Investing in Canada Plan** to be more like the GTF, to ensure that Atlantic Canadian municipalities with limited resources can partner directly with the federal government to respond to local needs.

Modernization is a buzz word that's being used a lot in this campaign.

But it's clear that our 379 members, like their municipal colleagues across Canada, also want more municipal discretion, and greater consultation prior to changes.

We need to bring our relationship with the federal government to the next stage.

Programs and funding tools need to be modernized to recognize the realities and expertise of smaller communities.

Connectivity – both via Internet and Cellular – was also a high priority when we surveyed our members.

With about 43% of the province's population living in rural areas, and communities with a population of less than 1,000 people, it's not a surprise that more than half of our members flagged the issue as a top concern.

It's up there with attracting – and retaining – immigrants, providing affordable housing, and combating climate change.

Communities depend on internet and cellular connectivity to attract and retain residents and businesses.

The federal government committed \$1.7 billion to broadband funding in the 2019 budget, but best estimates show it will cost far more.

Municipal governments, already strapped to fund the basics in communities, can't make up the difference.

The next party to form the federal government needs to be prepared connect our communities, to close the Internet access gap.

***Juanita Spencer is CEO of Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, which has represented the collective voice of municipalities in the province since 1906. Members include all 50 of Nova Scotia's municipalities, and the 379 mayors, wardens and councillors that represent them.***