



NOVA SCOTIA FEDERATION
OF MUNICIPALITIES

May 20, 2020

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Town of Yarmouth

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County of Kings

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Halifax Regional Municipality

REGIONAL CAUCUS CHAIR:

Councillor Clarence Prince
Cape Breton Regional Municipality

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Deputy Mayor Geoff Stewart
County of Colchester

TOWNS CAUCUS CHAIR:

Mayor Brenda Chisholm-Beaton
Town of Port Hawkesbury

The Honourable Stephen McNeil,
Premier of Nova Scotia
Via email: premier@novascotia.ca

Dear Premier McNeil:

RE: Financial Support for Fall Municipal Elections

As the voice of all 49 of Nova Scotia's municipalities, it is incumbent upon NSFM to share the concerns of our members. To this end, we are providing a list of those issues brought forward around the financial, operational, and other burdens our members will face because of the decision to proceed with the scheduled October elections.

The fallout from this unilateral decision will have far-reaching implications for our members, who are impacted by the lack of consultation and the compounded costs, and the ability to hold a fair election amid myriad health concerns for their electors and the many others involved in the election process. While we understand the decision has been made, the following lists many of the concerns we have with the fall election:

- **Lack of Consultation**

Early in the pandemic, NSFM flagged the consequences of conducting campaigns and elections with physical distancing measures. Despite the early warning in our April 7 letter to the Minister of Municipal Affairs, the department didn't reach out to consult with our board, executive staff or members. As we are the experts in municipal elections, the lack of consultation to ensure all concerns were addressed has led to a decision that was not fully informed. Now, more than ever, we need to ensure the experts are at the tables informing decisions.

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The Partnership Framework that connects NSFM and the Province outlines that joint engagement “is critically important” in decisions that impact local governments. NSFM sent a clear signal in a letter two weeks ago that we expect more collaboration and consultation on municipal issues. Again, it is imperative if we are going to make informed decisions. The Province’s failure to consult and collaborate with NSFM breaches the partnership framework it promised to follow in May 2018.

- Costs

NSFM respectfully challenges Minister Porter’s suggestion that municipalities can easily conduct safe elections by increasing both the number of polling stations and the days for advance polling, or by using alternate voting methods like e-voting.

First, each one comes at a cost. The primary focus for municipalities this year has been providing essential services to residents and businesses while remaining financially solvent. Covering the cost of a regular election under current circumstances would be a financial burden for all, but the added responsibility of ensuring elections are carried out with the required physical distancing during a global pandemic will make it more costly for some, and financially unbearable for others.

There are other issues to consider with the suggested alternatives. In the last election in 2016, councils in 23 municipalities used electronic voting. It would be a challenge for all 49 municipalities to use E-voting because many rural areas continue to struggle with unreliable or unavailable internet connections. Telephone voting should be an option in all municipalities, but again, there are costs associated and many will simply not take part in telephone voting. To ensure municipalities can introduce the suggested safety measures and alternative voting capabilities, we’re asking that the Province provide financial assistance to Nova Scotia municipalities to adequately carry them out.

- The Democratic Process

This is Canada. Much of the rest of the world would do anything to be here, in huge part because of our democratic process. The importance of ensuring the integrity of that process cannot be understated. We are playing with the system when we cannot knock on doors, have town hall meetings, talk to people face to face, and when voters cannot

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vote in a manner that is comfortable for them, especially given the pandemic concerns.

Many seniors, we know, will only vote at a poll. If they do not feel safe going to the poll during a pandemic, or in the subsequent aftermath, we have, in effect, taken away their ability to vote. We need to be very careful. People have to be able to vote. While October is less than five months away, we can all agree that things will not have returned to “normal” by then.

We have heard from some that incumbents will “have the upper hand” because they are known. It is important you are aware of that point as we do not know how those new to the election process will react to this.

Municipalities have been encouraged to use “other visible methods” rather than canvassing door-to-door to engage voters. That course of action is lessened in several municipalities in Nova Scotia, where councils have already voted to ban the display of all campaign lawn signs during elections. Given our fight to reduce plastics and do all things in an environmentally-friendly manner, those municipalities and those running within them should not be penalized for doing the right thing.

- Health Concerns

Several of our members have raised concerns about providing secure polling stations for the veterans and seniors in their communities. COVID-19 remains a significant threat in this country, and the risk of infection is particularly high for older people. It will take additional funds to ensure this demographic is adequately and safely served on election day by providing ample space, balloting options and voting assistance. Some units may have to consider providing mobile polls in Long Term Care homes, another element which could force up their costs.

We have to make sure voters feel safe coming out to vote. If they don't, then residents could decide to stay home instead of exercising their democratic right on Oct. 17. That's not democracy at its best.

- Economics

Where are the economic engines that will restart the economy located? At the local

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level. In municipalities. The first round of this pandemic is not nearly over, and we are less than five months out from the election. This one is tremendously important: We won't know how bad things are until we try to restart the engines. We fully expect to be running at 110% to do all we can to ensure our communities are okay, but to be asked to start, then go into full-blown election mode is counter-productive and risky. We will ALL need to give everything we have, full-time, to the economy.

The aftermath of this pandemic is going to need everyone at optimal performance. An election is going to take away from that, needlessly and to the detriment of the entire Province. Of that, there is no doubt.

- Experienced Councils

NSFM also has serious concerns about putting first-time politicians in the middle of a very real and potentially worse second wave of COVID. At the same time, they will be asked to restart an economy without the background on what was done and why. We have the utmost respect for our voters. This is not about who they put in office. It is, again, about stopping what will be a full-blown restart of the economy to run an election, but on top of that, bring the newly-elected up to speed. Many staff hours will need to go into this, perhaps more than usual, which will take staff away from carrying out much-needed duties with regard to moving us all forward.

The bottom line for NSFM is this: Would the Province ever consider calling a provincial election in times like these? If there was an option to delay for six months, what level of government would forge ahead?

In closing, a reminder that Nomination Day throughout the Province is in the first week of September. Should a second round of COVID come to be, or should any other factors come to light that would be cause for reconsidering the October election date, NSFM will require early and frequent consultation. There will be too much at stake by that point to allow for any last-minute switch.

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "P Mood". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter "P" being large and stylized.

Mayor Pam Mood,
President, Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities

CC: The Honourable Chuck Porter, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing