



NOVA SCOTIA FEDERATION
OF MUNICIPALITIES

**Municipal Governance Survey Report
September 2025**



Introduction

A survey was conducted to better understand the opinions of elected municipal officials in Nova Scotia on municipal governance in general, and on the issue of strong mayor powers.

This issue is timely because in recent years, Ontario has given municipalities strong mayor powers, granting council leaders more authority than is typical in Canada¹. These changes have drawn attention across the country, including in Nova Scotia, where officials are considering what such powers could mean for local democracy. In Ontario, leaders of council can advance provincial priorities with the support of only one-third of council, veto motions seen as conflicting with those priorities, and make major staffing and organizational decisions without council approval. This survey was designed to capture how Nova Scotia's municipal officials view these developments and their potential implications for local governance.

The survey included three demographic questions (position on council, municipality, and municipal type) and 20 questions related to municipal governance, where participants were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with various statements (See Appendix A). Respondents also had the option to provide long-answer comments. An additional five open-ended questions provided additional context.

A separate survey was also distributed to gather perspectives on the warden model system. While the results of that survey were not analyzed as part of this report, they are included for reference in Appendix B.

Participants

Questions 1–20 received 119 responses, representing 41 of the 49 municipalities in Nova Scotia. Respondents included 77 councillors, 16 mayors, 14 deputy mayors, 7 wardens, 5 deputy wardens. There were no statistically significant differences in responses based on municipal type (rural counties/districts, towns, or regional municipalities).

Results

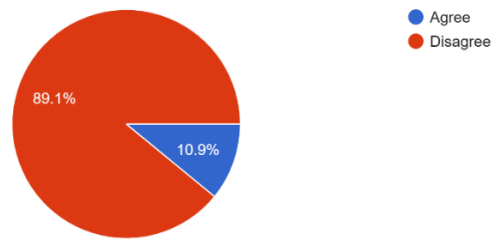
The results of questions 1-20 can be found in Appendix A. The NSFMS survey revealed three key themes regarding strong mayor legislation.

1. Preference for Majority Council Decision-Making

The majority of respondents believe that decisions should remain in the hands of the council. 83.2% of respondents disagree that the mayor should be able to pass motions with less than majority support from council (Q1). In addition, 89.1% opposed giving the mayor veto power over council decisions (Q2). While 51.3% supported giving the mayor an extra vote to break ties, respondents generally rejected broader strong mayor powers.

2. In certain circumstances a motion passed by a majority vote of council should be subject to a veto by the mayor.

119 responses



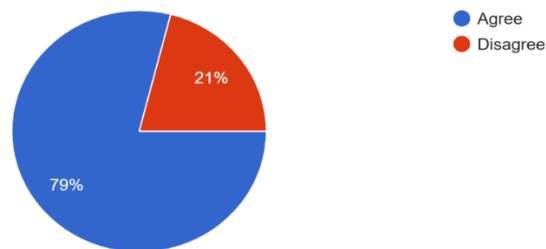
Currently, the Municipal Government Act in Nova Scotia, does not permit a less than majority council voteⁱⁱ. This support for majority decision-making mirrors the approach taken in many Ontario municipalities. Although assigned strong mayor powers in 2022, many municipalities have pledged not to use the powers despite having them availableⁱⁱⁱ. For example, Ottawa’s Mayor Sutcliffe has stated he will not use the powers, preferring collaboration with council^{iv}. This suggests that, even where strong mayor powers exist, collaborative governance and majority decision-making remain the preferred approach in practice.

2. Concerns About Accountability, Transparency, and Risk

Survey respondents did not believe that stronger mayoral authority would lead to greater accountability or transparency. 73% of respondents did not agree with the link between more authority in the mayor’s office and increased accountability for municipal priorities or greater transparency (Q5, Q6, Q7). In line with this result, 79% associated stronger mayoral powers with increased legal or financial risk (Q15).

15. Giving more authority to the mayor increases legal or financial risk to the municipality.

119 responses



Strong Mayor powers were introduced to help advance provincial priorities, particularly housing. However, their implementation has not clearly produced these intended outcomes^v. As noted by Zack Taylor (2023) in *Strong(er) Mayors in Ontario – What Difference Will They Make?*, the powers are intended to support provincial housing priorities yet there are no clear guidelines defining those priorities or specifying how mayoral actions must align with them. For

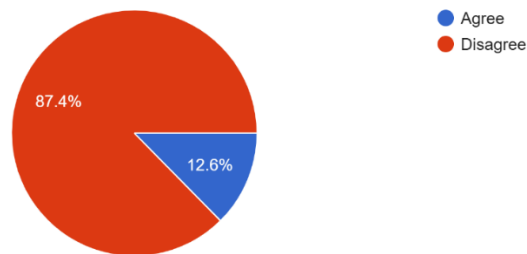
example, in Aurora, the mayor used these powers to block the development of an emergency housing shelter, an action that led a councillor to criticize the legislation as overly broad and susceptible to misuse^{vi}. These outcomes reflect the doubts expressed by municipal elected officials in Nova Scotia, who did not agree that more mayoral authority would increase accountability for certain priorities or greater transparency.

3. Protecting the Council–CAO Model

Respondents disagreed with transferring administrative authority from the council to only the mayor. Approximately 88% disagreed with giving the mayor power to hire or fire the CAO or making the CAO an employee of the mayor (Q9, Q14). 78.2% disagreed with allowing the mayor to direct senior staff (Q11). As well as 92.4% disagreed with giving the mayor power to reorganize the municipality’s administrative structure (Q12).

9. A mayor should be able to hire or dismiss the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO).

119 responses



This feedback reflects support for Nova Scotia’s current framework under the Municipal Government Act, which sets out a Council–CAO model that separates administrative and political roles^{vii}. In this model, the CAO is employed by council and reports to council. Introducing strong mayor powers would shift accountability by making the CAO a mayoral appointee, giving the mayor direct authority over staff, and allowing the mayor to restructure the administration without council oversight. Survey respondents signaled disagreement with these changes.

Several reports have examined these concerns. The Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (2023) highlighted the benefits of an apolitical public service led by an effective CAO^{viii}. They cautioned that strong mayor legislation could compromise the neutrality and objectivity of CAOs and senior officials.

A 2024 report by StrategyCorp examined how strong mayor powers have affected the local political environment from the perspective of CAO’s in Ontario municipalities^{ix}. The findings were mixed: in some municipalities, CAOs reported that it was “business as usual,” often because the mayor delegated most authority back to council or chose not to exercise the new powers. Some positives were noted, including the mayor’s ability to break tie votes or reduce

certain kinds of political interference. However, the report also found challenges, such as intentional fractures in council–mayor relationships, and greater instability due to staff changes.

Summary

Taken together, these findings suggest that a majority of respondents do not support strong mayor powers. Nova Scotia’s municipal elected officials value council decision-making, accountability and transparency, and the existing Council–CAO model over expanding authority in the mayor’s office. Elected officials feel community priorities are best addressed through the current governance structure.

ⁱ <https://www.ontario.ca/document/ontario-municipal-councillors-guide/10-strong-mayor-powers-and-duties>

ⁱⁱ <https://nslegislature.ca/sites/default/files/legc/statutes/municipal%20government.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.torontotoday.ca/local/city-hall/sixplex-vote-chow-defends-not-using-strong-mayor-powers-10903623>; <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/council/council-committee-meetings/mayoral-decisions/>; <https://www.ctvnews.ca/ottawa/article/perth-ont-council-votes-to-ask-province-to-remove-it-from-strong-mayor-list/>; <https://www.am800cklw.com/news/tecumseh-mayor-will-not-use-strong-mayor-powers-to-overturn-haf-decision.html>

^{iv} <https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/queens-park-wants-to-give-ottawas-mayor-the-power-to-pass-bylaws-with-1-3-council-support-sutcliffe-doesnt-want-it>; <https://ottawa.ca/en/city-hall/open-transparent-and-accountable-government/public-disclosure/mayoral-decisions-pursuant-municipal-act-2001>

^v <https://www.hamilton.ca/city-council/council-committee/mayoral-decisions#20232024>; <https://www.ajax.ca/en/inside-townhall/mayoral-decisions.aspx>; <https://www.mississauga.ca/publication/mayoral-decisions/>; <https://guelph.ca/city-hall/mayor-and-council/city-council/mayoral-decisions/>; <https://www.caledon.ca/en/government/resources/Mayoral-Decisions/Mayoral-Decision-2024-07.pdf>; <https://www.caledon.ca/en/government/resources/Mayoral-Decisions/Mayoral-Decision-2024-11.pdf>; <https://caledoncitizen.com/province-unhappy-with-mayors-zoning-decision-due-to-conflict-with-413-corridor/>; https://www.caledonenterprise.com/news/council/my-guard-is-still-up-caledon-mayor-removes-12-developments-for-fast-tracked-rezoning-from/article_1e144983-46f8-5e39-b8ec-40b0cec082eb.html

^{vi} https://www.yorkregion.com/news/sickens-me-critics-angry-aurora-mayor-vetoes-controversial-mens-shelter/article_ad69fe99-1b69-5bc0-a716-4fda17c532f8.html; <https://www.aurora.ca/media/xmhpgjnw/mayoral-decision-veto-part-of-by-law-6677-25-request-to-york-region-mde-2025-006.pdf>

^{vii} <https://nslegislature.ca/sites/default/files/legc/statutes/municipal%20government.pdf>

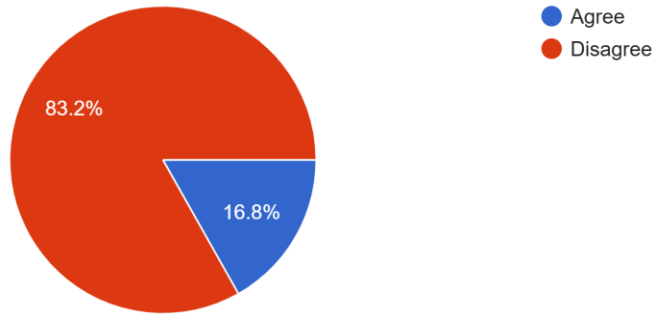
^{viii} https://www.camacam.ca/sites/default/files/2023-03/CAMA%20Strong%20Mayors%20White%20Paper%20-%20Final%20English%20-%20March%2023%202023_0.pdf

^{ix} <https://strategycorp.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/StrategyCorp-CAO-Report-2024.pdf>

Appendix A Strong Mayor Powers Survey Results

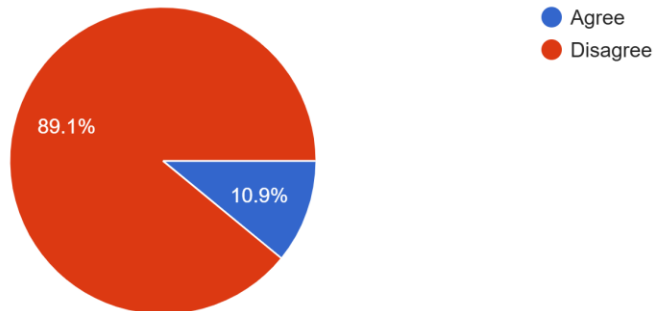
1. In certain circumstances, the mayor should be able to pass motions with less than majority support from council.

119 responses



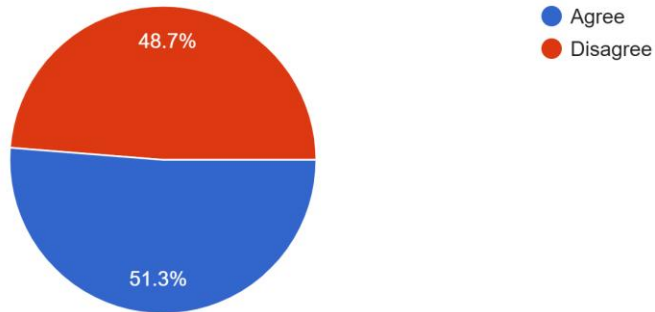
2. In certain circumstances a motion passed by a majority vote of council should be subject to a veto by the mayor.

119 responses



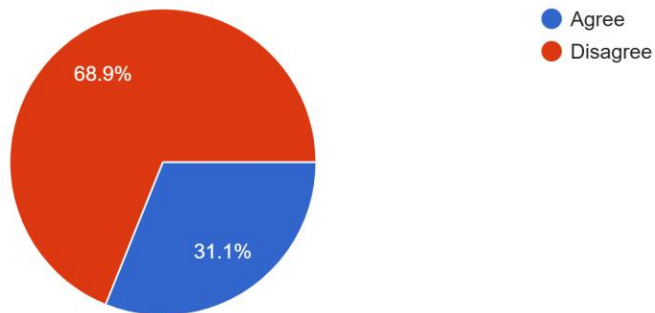
3. In certain circumstances, the mayor should be able to break council ties with an extra vote.

119 responses



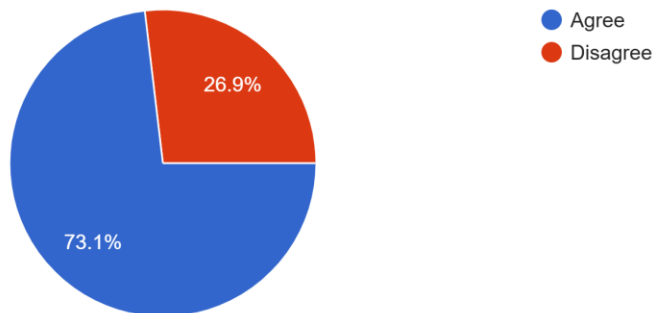
4. Among elected officials, the mayor is the most informed about the public's priorities.

119 responses



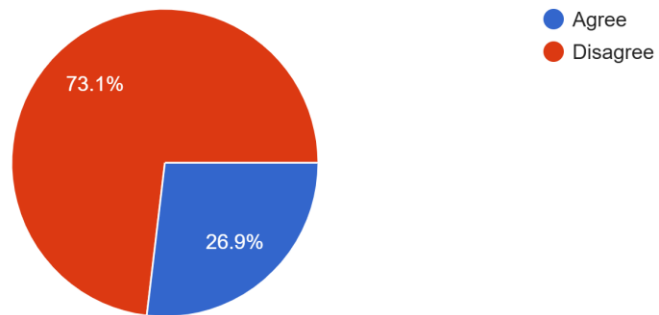
5. More authority in the mayor's office means less transparency.

119 responses



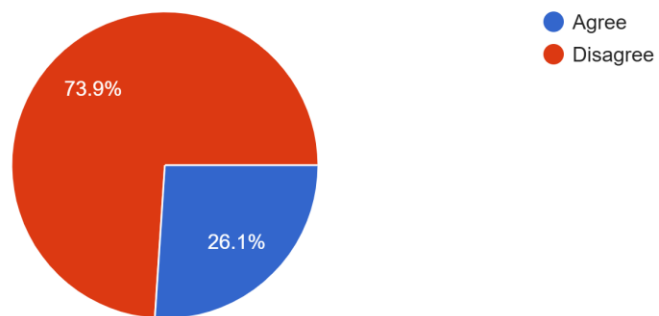
6. More authority in the mayor's office means more accountability for achieving municipal priorities.

119 responses



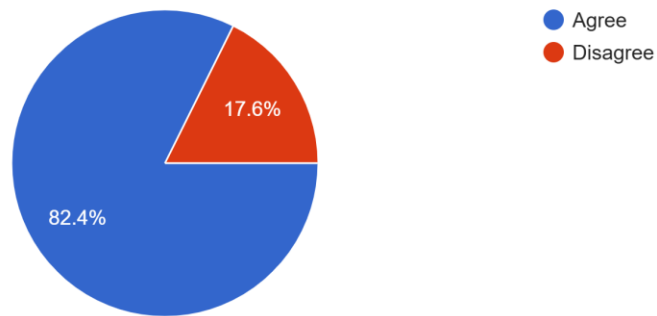
7. The ability of the mayor to make decisions faster will accelerate action on housing and infrastructure.

119 responses



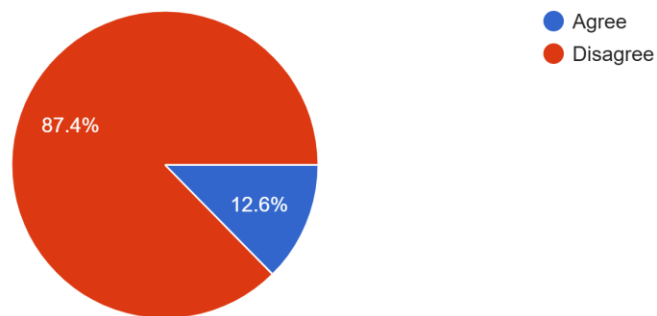
8. The ability of the council to make decisions faster will accelerate action on housing and infrastructure.

119 responses



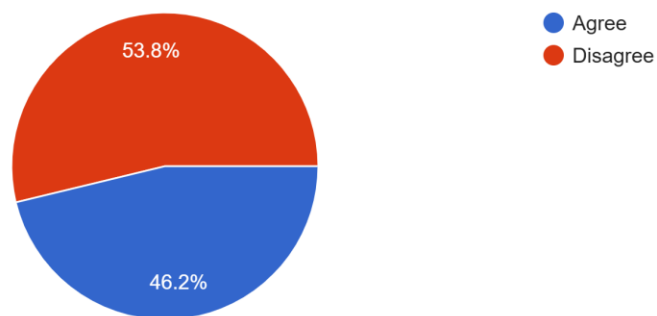
9. A mayor should be able to hire or dismiss the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO).

119 responses



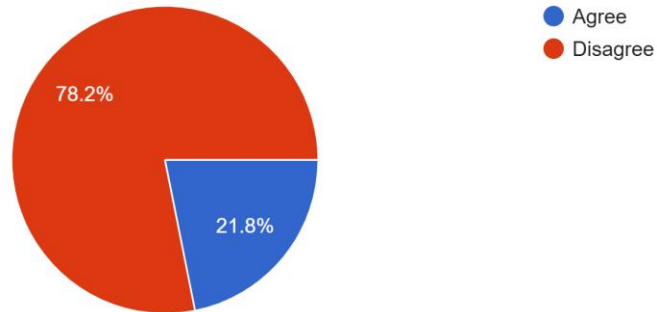
10. A mayor should be able to direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO).

119 responses



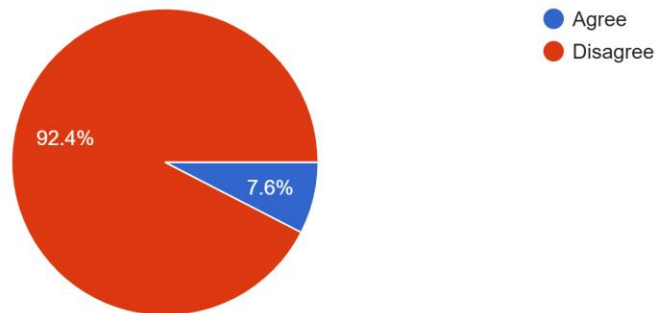
11. A mayor should be able to direct senior staff within the municipality.

119 responses



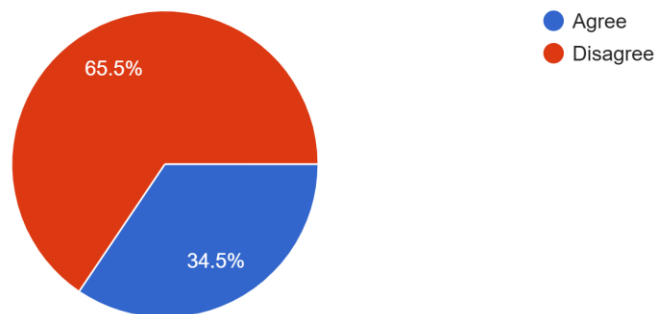
12. A mayor should be able to change the organizational structure of the municipality.

119 responses



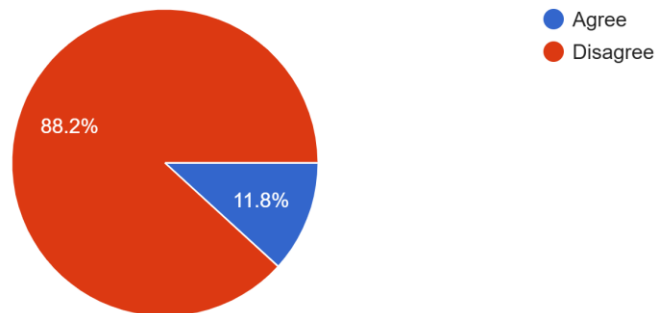
13. A mayor should be able to choose which councillors lead important decision-making committees of council.

119 responses



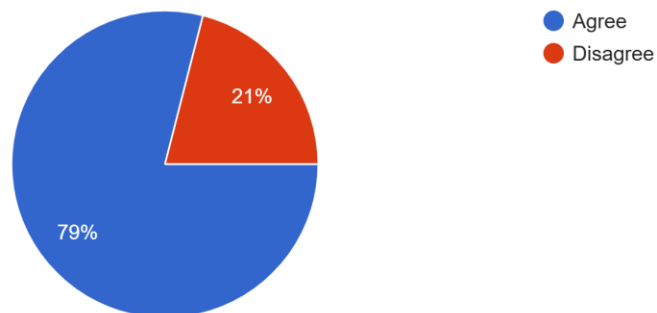
14. The Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) should be an employee of the mayor.

119 responses



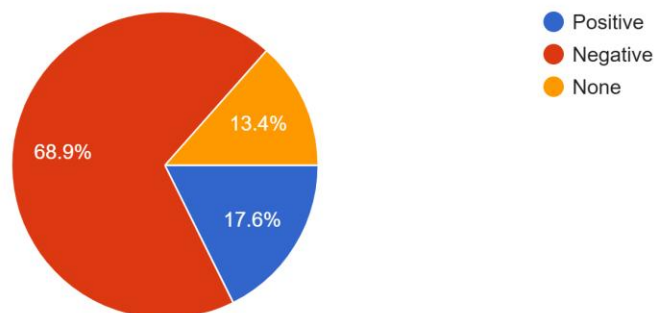
15. Giving more authority to the mayor increases legal or financial risk to the municipality.

119 responses



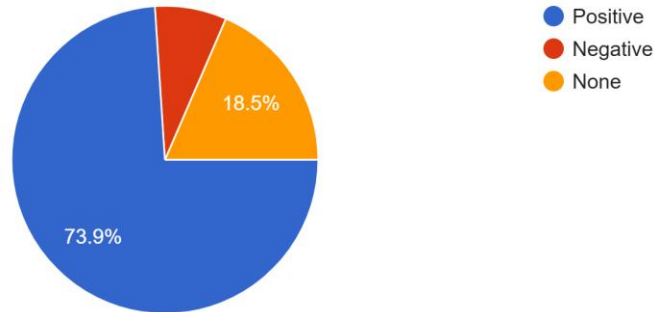
16. Impact of stronger legislative powers for the mayor on the community.

119 responses



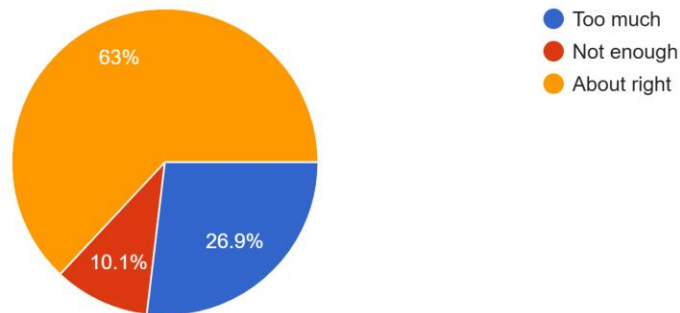
17. Impact of stronger legislative powers for the council on the community.

119 responses



18. The level of authority in the administrative structure of municipalities is

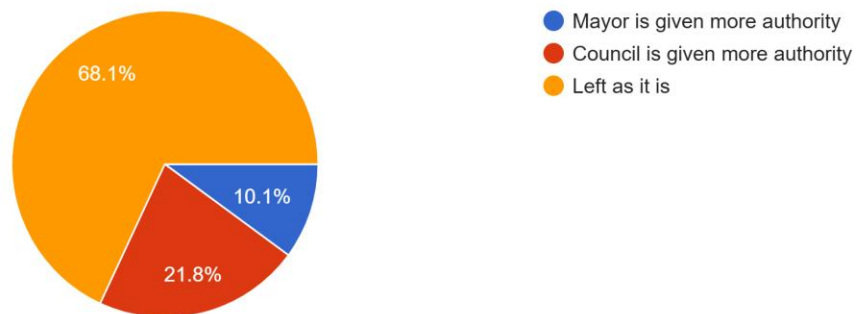
119 responses



18 a. Any comments on this?

19. Level of authority over the drafting of the annual budget would be better if

119 responses

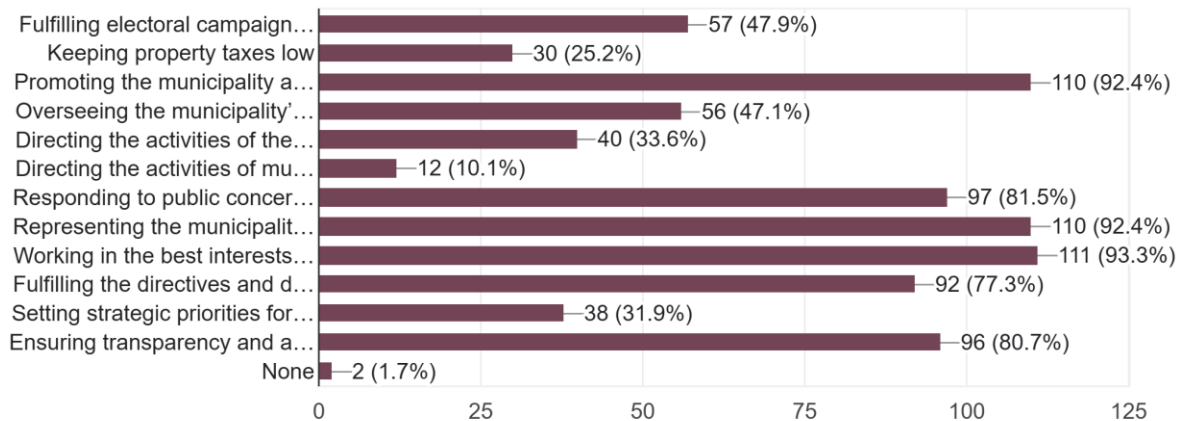


19 a. Additional comments?

20. What responsibilities do you believe the mayor should be accountable for in order to effectively deliver on their mandate?

Please check all that apply.

119 responses

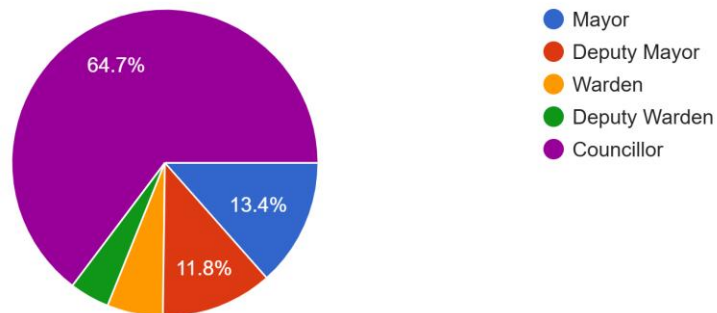


Comment Questions:

21. Specific areas of the *Municipal Government Act* that deal with the authority of the mayor, council, or the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) that should be changed.
22. Provide examples where you feel enhanced legislative powers for **the mayor** would be beneficial.
23. Provide examples where you feel enhanced legislative powers for **the mayor** would be harmful.
24. Provide examples where you feel enhanced legislative powers for **the council** would be beneficial.
25. Provide examples where you feel enhanced legislative powers for **the council** would be harmful.
26. Other ideas on changes to processes that would support good governance and responsible decision making in your municipality.

27. What is your position on council?

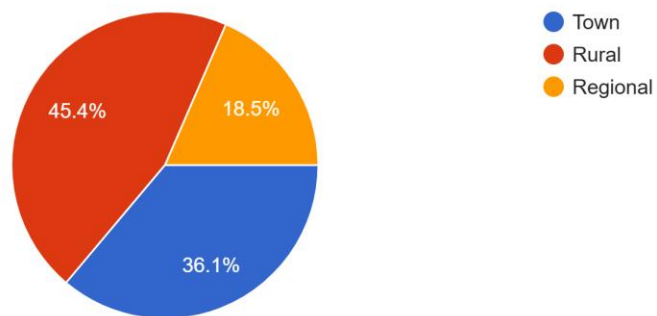
119 responses



28. What is your municipality?

29. Are you a Town, Rural or Regional municipality?

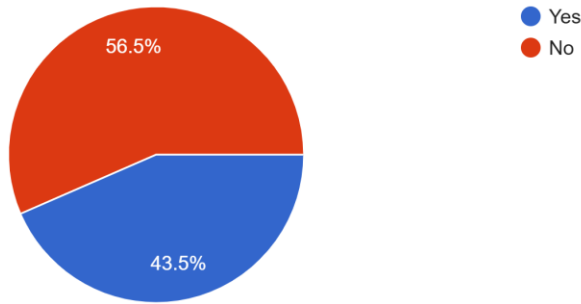
119 responses



Appendix B Warden Model Survey Results

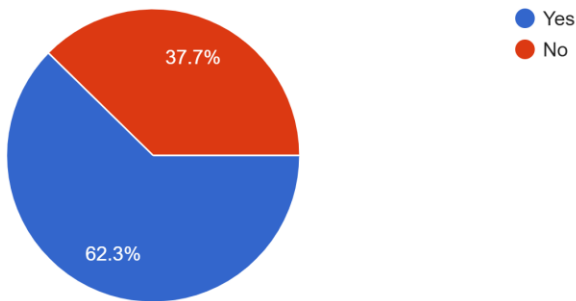
1. If towns and regional municipalities must have an elected mayor, is it reasonable that rural municipalities with the warden system continue to operate under the warden model?

69 responses



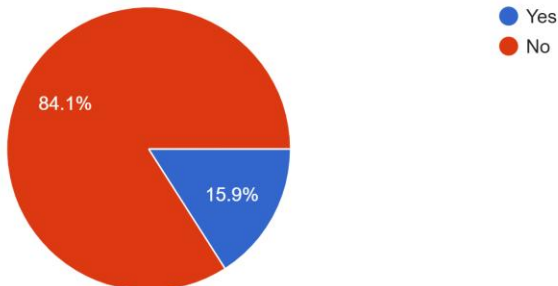
2. Do you feel the chair of the council should be chosen by the electorate?

69 responses



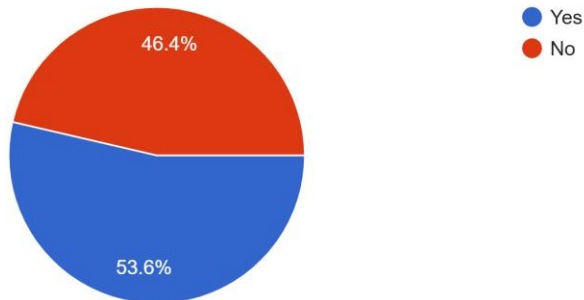
3. Do you believe the public understands the difference between a warden and a mayor?

69 responses



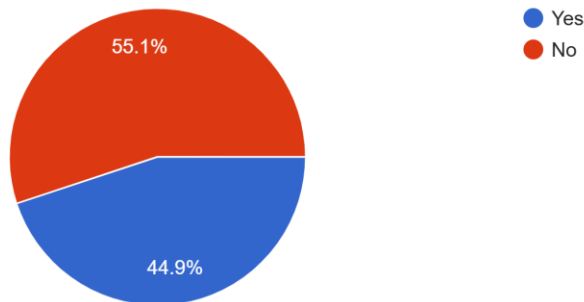
4. Should a warden have the same authority as a mayor?

69 responses



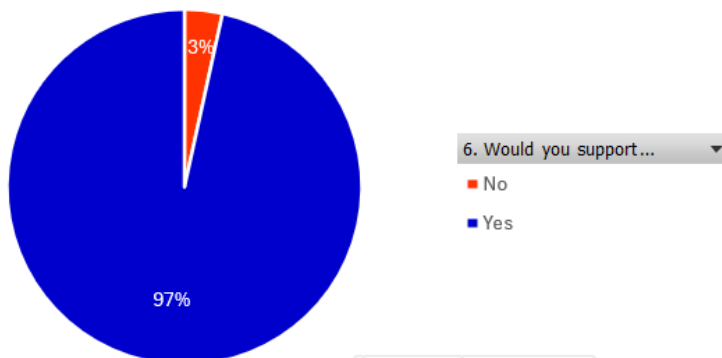
5. Is it equitable that a warden can be removed from office by a 2/3 vote of council, whereas a mayor cannot?

69 responses



6. Would you support implementing a mayor model for your municipality, if it is currently served by the warden system?

29 responses



Comment Questions

7. What do you see as the benefits of the warden model?

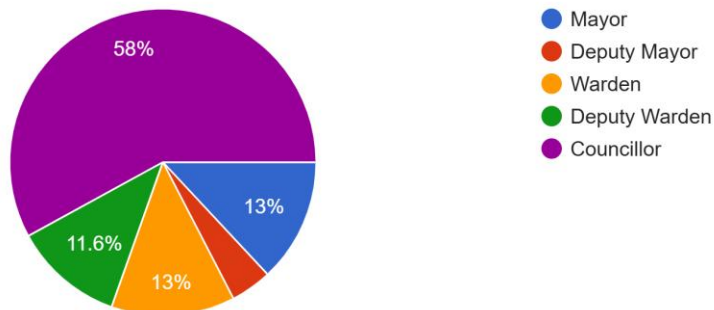
8. What do you see as the disadvantages of the warden model?

9. Question only for the 6 municipalities that changed from a warden model to a mayor model.
Comment on the advantages of the change.

10. Question only for the 6 municipalities that changed from a warden model to a mayor model
Comment on the disadvantages of the change.

11. What is your position on council? (choose from the selection provided)

69 responses



12. Are you from a (choose from the selection provided)

69 responses

