

Saskatchewan Municipal

Best Practice

Regional Asset Management & Group Learning

CONTACT

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Date: Ongoing

THE PRACTICE

Communities in Saskatchewan are relying on infrastructure networks that are reaching the end of their lifecycle. The challenges around level of service sustainability, managing risk and making the best use of financial resources are quite common among neighbouring Towns, Villages and Rural Municipalities throughout the Prairies. With approximately one-third of our infrastructure in fair, poor or very poor condition the risk of service disruption was becoming more frequent.

Planning Districts have been formally and informally established as a vehicle for municipalities to collaborate on matters relating to planning, procurement of services, economic development and information sharing. In 2016, the WaterWolf Planning Inc. [a District Planning Commission located in central Saskatchewan] was challenged with facilitating the development of asset management plans for member communities to meet the obligations of the Provincial-Municipal Gas Tax Agreement.

Regional cooperation was central to the approach that aimed to:

- Promote inter-municipal collaboration and group learning;[]
- Establish a better understanding of risk management and level of service;[]
- Catalyze prioritization of infrastructure investments in the region;[]
- Reduce consulting costs by taking advantage of economies of scale;[]
- Enable more effective and informed decision making; and[]
- Increase the collective capacity of municipal administrators and elected officials.

Using asset management practices and principles we are finding ways to better understand how municipal assets work, what they cost to operate and the levels of service that we can provide. We want to ensure residents are getting the best “bang for their buck” when it comes to local infrastructure and the services it provides.

This project, although done co-operatively, provided each municipal council with their own plan to forecast asset replacement investments, to better understand revenue sources and suitability, and to communicate more effectively with members of their community around the state of municipal assets.

The municipal members of the WaterWolf Planning Commission contracted Urban Systems, a planning and engineering consultant from Saskatoon, to facilitate a series of “group learning” workshops to create asset

management plans for each member municipality that included risk assessment, level of service and development of a 20-year asset replacement forecast.

THE PROCESS

The early discussion of this topic was initiated in 2016 by ML Whittles, former Chair of the WaterWolf Executive Board, and former Mayor of the Village of Kenaston together with Russ McPherson of Midsask Futures, Outlook. Following the election of the current WaterWolf Board of Directors in November 2016, Joanne Brochu continued to advance this training opportunity with the added assistance of Brandy Losie in April 2017 to the present.

The municipal councils made the decision to work co-operatively within the Planning District to deliver a solid plan that was cost effective for all members. The municipal councils and staff from the 15 participating municipalities were involved with the “group learning” workshops throughout the duration of the project. In addition, municipal administrators from each community were actively involved with the creation of their asset management plan, with ongoing support of the external consulting team. Asset management plans were also reviewed and adopted by council.

The WaterWolf Executive coordinated the rental of workshop facilities, communication with participant municipalities, and overseeing/administering the contract with Urban Systems.

Urban Systems developed asset management plan templates for each municipality, the learning materials for the series of group learning workshops and were available for support to respond to technical questions throughout the delivery of the project (before and after the actual workshops).

For 2019, the members hired a summer student to collect field data of all infrastructure, as detailed in the asset management forecast, for digitization into a GIS format. Additional training was provided to Administration and Public Works for integration and implementation.

THE RESULTS

Participant municipalities have created a detailed asset inventory of all infrastructure categories along with an assessment of critical assets and the impacts associated with a potential loss of service. The asset management plan (AMP) allows municipalities to maintain and manage infrastructure assets at appropriate (and affordable) service levels, monitor standards and service levels to ensure that they meet community goals and objectives and establish infrastructure replacement strategies through the use of full life-cycle costing principles. We can financially plan the maintenance of assets to deliver appropriate service levels and extend the useful life of assets and establish stable long-term budgeting to replace, renew or decommission different assets. We will also incorporate the AMP into other corporate plans such as the Official Community Plan and can report publicly on the status and performance of work related to the implementation of the asset management policy. The AMP is an invaluable tool for managing infrastructure through changes in elected officials and employees and provides for consistency with those changes.

The participant municipalities were approved for funding from FCM to increase various capabilities described in FCM’s Asset Management Readiness Scale. Specifically, WaterWolf has digitized asset information into a GIS format, conducted a series of workshops (for councilors and staff), focused on implementing our AMP’s, and collected asset field location data.

Asset management is a continuous process that requires knowledgeable staff who have been allocated the time to dedicate themselves to developing and maintaining the AMP’s. The respective municipal offices recognized that the ability to dedicate additional time for key administrative staff to develop the plans was not suitable relative to the

magnitude of the assigned task. Therefore, staff are asked to complete and maintain the plans “off the corner” of their desks. As such, availability of experienced staff as well as the financial resources to support the staff time required was a major challenge.

The WaterWolf approach toward regional asset management planning and incorporating “group learning” has directly influenced the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) Municipal Asset Management Program (MAMP) new proposal call for their national asset management program. Municipal administrators from four participant communities along with Urban Systems were invited by FCM to attend two national workshops earlier in 2018, and in 2019 present in a webinar to describe the approach and share our learnings.

LESSONS LEARNED

A few of the key lessons learned included;

- taking a regional approach toward asset management planning truly can be more cost effective on a per community basis;
- municipalities were encouraged to network during the group learning workshops which helped with the development of the asset inventory, sharing of best practices and improving relationships between municipal administrators (which had resulted in more collaboration between communities within the region);
- Administrators also appreciated working with their own infrastructure asset information and learning more about the extent of the municipal assets;
- Learning how to leverage GIS as a tool to support various asset management activities (archiving data, communication, updating financial plans, etc); and,
- Annual budgets are constrained already so to provide a solid AMP in this way improved the quality of dialog through the annual budget setting process