

WHAT WE HEARD REPORT: THE REAL STORY OF **MUNICIPAL** **LEADERSHIP**

Why This Matters

Alberta's municipalities need strong, prepared leaders. With the 2025 municipal election approaching, the Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) and Alberta Municipalities (ABmunis) have joined forces to help potential candidates understand the realities of municipal governance—before they put their names forward.

Our survey of 201 current municipal councillors across Alberta reveals what textbooks can't teach: the lived experiences, challenges, and rewards of local leadership. These insights form the foundation of our upcoming webinar series designed to prepare and inspire the next generation of municipal leaders.

ELECTION AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

Through the release of informational materials and a series of webinars, this initiative aims to build stronger councils, provide a clear understanding of municipal roles, and ensure that new councillors are ready to lead with confidence.

These offerings are designed to help strengthen relationships between councils and administration and encourage diverse candidates from all backgrounds—including traditionally underrepresented groups—to consider running for office. By increasing understanding of local government and elections among all Albertans, we aim to foster a more informed and inclusive understanding of municipal governance.

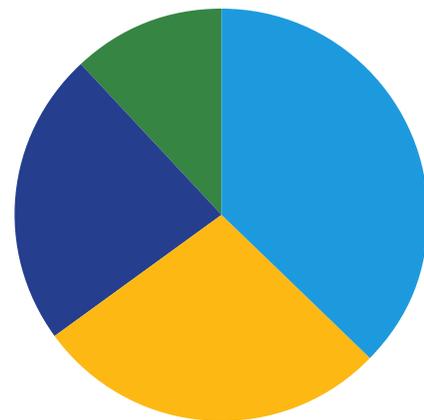
A province-wide survey of municipal councillors was conducted to shape the content of these webinars with real-world insights. Running from February 12 to February 28, 2025, the survey gathered 201 responses, offering diverse perspectives from leaders across Alberta.

Working With Administration

We heard from councillors representing the full spectrum of Alberta's municipal landscape:

- **76 respondents** from rural municipalities
- **56 respondents** from small municipalities (under 2,500 residents)
- **47 respondents** from small municipalities (2,500 - 15,000 residents)
- **24 respondents** from mid-size & regional municipalities (over 15,000 residents)

Their candid responses provide a firsthand look at the challenges, experiences, and lessons learned by councillors, ensuring that prospective candidates have the knowledge and preparation they need to serve their communities effectively.



- Rural Municipalities
- Small Municipalities (under 2,500 residents)
- Small Municipalities (2,500–15,000 residents)
- Mid-size & Regional Municipalities (over 15,000 residents)

KEY THEMES: WHAT MUNICIPAL LEADERSHIP REALLY LOOKS LIKE

Becoming a municipal councillor is an eye-opening experience—demanding, rewarding, and sometimes more complex than candidates initially expect. Survey responses revealed a learning curve where new councillors must quickly adapt to governance structures, time commitments, and balancing diverse community needs. Many entered with big ambitions and discovered that creating meaningful change requires collaboration, patience, and strategic thinking.

Despite these challenges, respondents overwhelmingly emphasized the rewards of municipal service. By developing strong support networks and key leadership skills, councillors find ways to navigate the complexities of governance and make a positive impact in their communities.

Below are the top ten themes that emerged from the survey, offering an inside look at the experiences of Alberta’s municipal leaders.

Key Themes

Challenges of Governance

- 1. Steep Learning Curve** – New councillors sometimes feel unprepared for the complexity of municipal governance.

“The first six months involved a lot of listening and learning. There’s so much to absorb about process, legislation, and how decisions actually get made.”

- 2. Finding Your Voice** – Many councillors expected to drive major changes immediately but found their ability to create change was shaped by council dynamics and the governance process.

“I initially thought I could walk in and make immediate changes, but I learned that creating meaningful impact is more about collaboration and building consensus over time.”

- 3. Unexpected Time Commitment** – Council work, including meetings, calls, and community engagement, requires more time than anticipated.

“Be prepared for your council duties to take more time than you initially expect—especially if you’re passionate about serving your community well.”

- 4. Council and Administration Dynamics** – Collaborative partnerships between council and administration are opportunities for innovative solutions and enhance service delivery to the community.

“Building a positive working relationship with administration is essential. When council and administration work well together, we can accomplish so much more for our communities.”

Skills and Support for Success

- 5. Communication is Key** – Any prior experience in public speaking, mediation, or public service is beneficial.

“My background in community organizing helped tremendously. Being able to clearly explain complex issues to residents and listen effectively to their concerns has been essential.”

- 6. Strong Support Networks Matter** – Spousal and family support are key factors in councillors’ success.

“Having my family’s support has been crucial. My spouse understood from the beginning that some evenings would be dedicated to meetings, and some community events would cut into family time.”

- 7. Resilience and Adaptability** – Councillors must be willing to adapt, learn, and withstand political and community pressures.

“You develop a certain resilience over time. Not everyone will agree with every decision, but keeping focused on the bigger picture helps you stay grounded.”

Public Perception and Communication

8. Managing Misconceptions – Respondents were surprised by how much time they spend explaining municipal jurisdiction and processes to residents who have different expectations about what local government can do.

“Many residents don’t understand the limits of municipal authority or how long processes take. Educating the public about what we can and can’t do is a constant but important effort.”

9. Navigating Public Scrutiny and Criticism – Councillors face public criticism, particularly on social media, which can affect their well-being.

“I’ve learned to look for the legitimate concerns within criticism and address those, while not taking the rest personally. It’s about the role, not me as an individual.”

10. Making Tough Decisions – Decision-making often involves balancing public perception with the greater good.

“Sometimes the right decision for the long-term health of the community isn’t the most popular. Having clear reasoning and being transparent about the ‘why’ behind decisions helps.”

WHAT WE HEARD: KEY FINDINGS BY SURVEY QUESTION

The First Three Months: Diving Into Municipal Leadership

What were your first three months on council like? What resources and/or experiences helped you prepare to be a municipal councillor?

The first three months on council can feel like being thrown into the deep end of governance. New councillors must absorb a flood of information, make crucial decisions, and quickly adapt to the complex world of municipal leadership—all while facing the weight of public expectations. The knowledge and preparation they need to serve their communities effectively.

Key Takeaways

- **Orientation Sessions Were Crucial** – Briefings and internal onboarding provided essential groundwork, helping new councillors understand their roles and responsibilities. Additional online resources through RMA and ABmunis and external learning opportunities through EOEP (Elected Officials Education Program) and other organizations provide valuable context.
- **Support from Experienced Councillors** – Seasoned colleagues can become mentors and guides, offering insight into governance, decision-making, and political realities.
- **Information Overload** – From municipal bylaws to budget documents, councillors had to rapidly absorb information to be effective.
- **Public Expectations vs. Reality** – Many new councillors found that constituents expected immediate action, only to realize that municipal processes move at a much slower pace than anticipated.



In Their Words:

“Looking back, I wish I had attended more council meetings before running. The learning curve is steep, but orientation and mentorship from senior councillors made a world of difference.”

The early days of municipal leadership are a trial by fire, but the right resources and support systems make all the difference. Learning from experienced councillors, leaning on orientation sessions, and embracing the steep learning curve helped many navigate these first crucial months.

Expectations vs. Reality: What Councillors Can Actually Influence

What were your expectations about what you could accomplish as a councillor, and how did those change based on the reality of what you can influence?

Many councillors stepped into their roles with big ambitions, ready to make bold changes and leave their mark on their communities. The reality they discovered was that governance is a collaborative process that requires patience, negotiation, and strategic thinking.

Key Takeaways

- **High Expectations of Change** – Many new councillors believed they could quickly implement their vision, only to discover that change sometimes moves slowly in government.
- **Municipal Processes** – Policymaking, budgeting, and approvals take time to implement, requiring patience and persistence.
- **Influence Through Consensus** – No councillor acts alone—every decision is a group effort, requiring collaboration and compromise.
- **Balancing Constituents' Expectations** – Residents often demand immediate action, but small wins add up to meaningful change over time.
- **Understanding of Policy & Legislation Grew Over Time** – The boundaries of municipal authority became clearer as councillors gained a deeper understanding of governance, law, and process.



In Their Words:

"I've learned that big changes don't happen overnight, but with persistence and building relationships with fellow councillors, I've been able to make meaningful progress on issues I care about. Patience and collaboration are everything."

For many, the shift from idealism to realism was an eye-opener. But those who embraced the long-term approach, learned to work within the system, and mastered the art of negotiation found ways to create meaningful change over time.

Making Unpopular Decisions: Leading with Conviction

How do you handle situations where you need to make unpopular decisions that you believe are in the best interest of the community?

Making tough decisions is part of the job, but it doesn't make them any easier, especially when faced with public criticism. Councillors described the challenge of balancing what's right for the long-term health of the community with short-term public opinion.

Key Takeaways

- **Integrity and Long-Term Thinking** – The best leaders don't chase popularity—they focus on what's right for the community, even when it's controversial.
- **Facing Criticism** – Social media, public meetings, and community spaces can become hotbeds of criticism, requiring councillors to manage pressure from all sides.
- **The Role of Communication** – Clearly explaining the why behind a decision—whether through town halls, social media, or one-on-one conversations—helps ease tensions and builds trust.
- **Seeking Council and Administrative Support** – Leaning on fellow councillors and municipal administration provides reassurance, expertise, and a unified front in difficult moments.
- **Resilience is a Requirement** – The ability to stay composed under fire, separate emotion from decision-making, and focus on the bigger picture is critical.



In Their Words:

“When I know a decision is right for the community's future, I focus on clearly explaining the reasoning and benefits. Not everyone will agree, but most people respect transparency and honesty, even when they disagree with the outcome.”

At the end of the day, councillors must lead with conviction—standing by their decisions, engaging in tough conversations, and reminding themselves why they took on the role in the first place.

Common Misconceptions: What Councillors Wish They Had Known

What misconceptions did you have about the role of a municipal councillor before being elected?

For many new councillors, stepping into the role was a wake-up call. What they expected and what they actually experienced often didn't align—whether about their individual influence, the pace of change, or the nature of public service.

Key Takeaways

- **Limits of Individual Power** – Many assumed councillors had more direct control, only to realize that governance is a team effort, requiring votes, policies, and processes.
- **Reality of Bureaucracy** – The amount of processes, regulations, and legal constraints caught some by surprise, slowing down progress and limiting what could be changed quickly.
- **Expectations of Public Approval** – Some believed they would be widely supported—until they realized that every decision comes with its critics.
- **Assuming Meetings Would Be More Challenging** – While some expected intense debates and conflict, others found meetings to be more procedural than anticipated.
- **Believing All Councillors Shared the Same Goals** – Many assumed council members would always work toward a common vision, only to find that council members bring diverse priorities and perspectives.



In Their Words:

“I thought I'd have more direct control over fixing specific issues in my neighbourhood. I've learned that governance is about setting direction through policy and working with the administration to implement that vision—not personally directing day-to-day operations.”

The biggest lesson? Municipal governance is often more complex than it appears from the outside. But those who adapted quickly, stayed patient, and focused on collaboration rather than control found the most success.

Time Commitments: Breaking Down a Typical Week

Could you break down a typical week as a councillor, including approximate hours spent on different activities?

Municipal service requires significant time commitment, varying by municipality size and role. Most councillors reported spending between 15-25 hours weekly on council duties, with some rural and larger urban councillors often reporting higher time commitments.

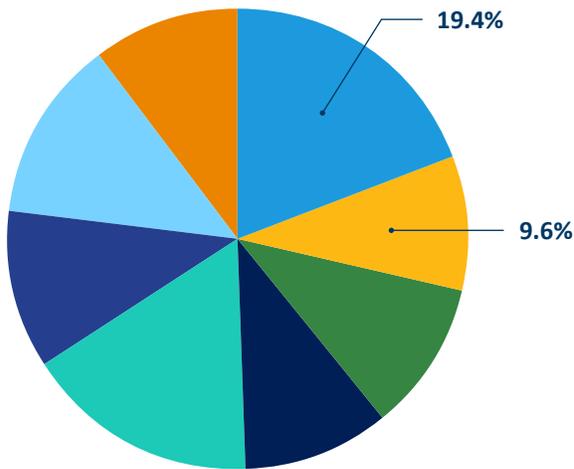
Key Takeaways

The breakdown of weekly time commitments related to council and non-council duties are reflected in the following charts.

Legend

- Official Meetings
- Phone Calls
- Emails
- Constituency
- Research
- Community Events
- Traveling
- Admin Meetings

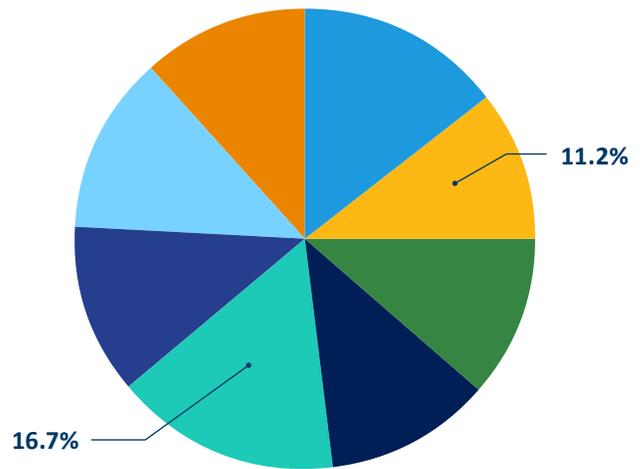
Rural Municipality



Insights

On average, councillors in rural municipalities spent most of their time in **Official Meetings**, and the least amount of time on **Phone Calls**.

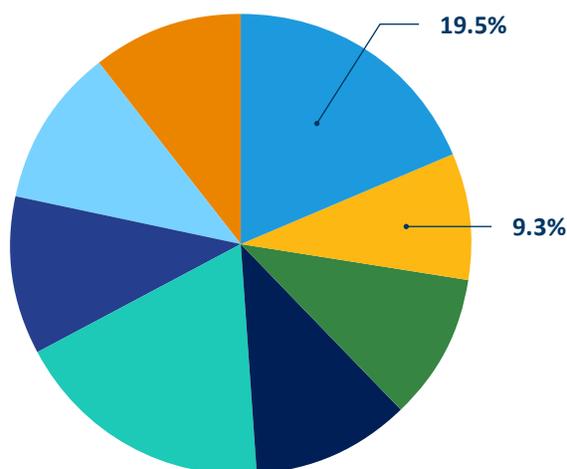
Small Municipality (population <2,500)



Insights

On average, councillors in small municipalities with a population under 2,500 spent most of their time on **Research**, and the least amount of time on **Phone Calls**.

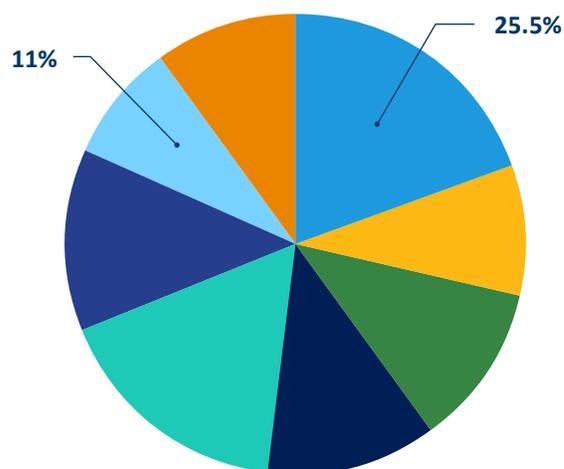
Small Municipality (population of 2,500–15,000)



Insights

On average, councillors in small municipalities with a population of 2,500–15,000 spent most of their time in **Official Meetings**, and the least amount of time on **Phone Calls**.

Mid-size & Regional Municipality (population of 15,000+)



Insights

On average, councillors in mid-size & regional municipalities with a population over 15,000 spent most of their time in **Official Meetings**, and the least amount of time **Traveling**.

Key Themes

1. Time Allocation Increases with Population Size:

<2,500 pop: ~22 hours/week
 2,500-15,000: ~26 hours/week
 15,000+: ~24.5 hours/week

2. Changing Priorities:

Official Meetings grow from 15% to 25.5% of time as population increases

Research remains consistently important (16.7%–21.9%)

Phone Calls become less significant in larger municipalities

3. Most Time-Consuming Tasks by Size:

Smallest: **Research** (16.7%)

Medium: **Official Meetings** (19.5%) and Research (18.9%)

Largest: **Official Meetings** (25.5%) and Research (21.9%)



In Their Words:

“Between regular council meetings, committee work, community events, and constituent conversations, I average about 20 hours per week—and that’s in a smaller community. Be prepared to adjust your schedule frequently.”

While the time needed for council work depends on your community’s size and your own level of involvement, most councillors find that the 15-25 hours per week fits alongside their jobs and family life.

Handling Criticism: Developing Resilience

How do you handle public criticism, especially on social media or in community spaces like the grocery store?

Public service comes with public scrutiny—and councillors quickly learn that criticism isn't confined to council chambers. Whether it's social media debates, heated grocery store encounters, or public events turning into impromptu complaint sessions, handling criticism with grace, resilience, and strategy is essential.

Key Takeaways

- **Avoiding Social Media Arguments** – Many councillors step back from online debates, recognizing that engaging in back-and-forth disputes rarely changes minds.
- **It Isn't Personal** – Over time, councillors learn to separate personal attacks from constructive criticism, focusing on their role, not the noise.
- **Education as a Strategy** – Providing clear, factual explanations about decisions helps shift conversations from criticism to understanding.
- **Support Networks Helped** – Family, colleagues, and trusted peers provide an outlet for councillors to vent frustrations and stay grounded.
- **Public Spaces Could Be Challenging** – Grocery store aisles and community events often turn into unexpected forums for complaints, requiring councillors to stay patient and professional, even off the clock.



In Their Words:

"I've found that listening genuinely to concerns, even when expressed harshly, often defuses tension. When people feel heard, the conversation shifts from complaint to problem-solving."

At the end of the day, effective councillors focus on their mission, not the noise. They engage when it's productive, tune out negativity when it's not, and lean on support systems to stay resilient.

Personal Support Networks: The Foundation for Success

What conversations with your family/spouse were most important to have before deciding to run, and what support systems have been most crucial to your success as a councillor?

Running for council isn't just a personal decision—it's a family commitment. The demands of public office extend beyond meetings and votes, impacting time at home, personal privacy, and emotional well-being. Councillors who had open, honest conversations with their families before running were better prepared for the realities of the role.

Key Takeaways

- **Understanding the Time Commitment** – Serving on council sometimes requires long hours, unexpected demands, and constant availability, making family support essential.
- **Preparing for Public Scrutiny** – Before running, many councillors had to discuss how public criticism—both fair and unfair—could affect their family's privacy and well-being.
- **Balancing Work and Council Duties** – Councillors had to juggle multiple responsibilities, ensuring they could meet the demands of both public office and their professional/personal lives.
- **Emotional Toll on Families** – Public criticism doesn't just impact councillors—it affects spouses and children too, requiring strong communication and emotional support at home.
- **Importance of Spousal Support** – Having a supportive partner made all the difference, whether it was managing household responsibilities, offering encouragement, or simply being a sounding board after tough days.



In Their Words:

“My family knew what we were getting into because we talked extensively about it before I ran. They've been my biggest supporters and my safe space when public criticism gets tough.”

For many councillors, their family's support was the foundation of their success. Those who had clear expectations and strong support systems in place found it easier to navigate the pressures and responsibilities of public life.

Valuable Skills: What Helps Councillors Succeed

What skills from your previous work/life experience proved most valuable in your council role?

Municipal leadership isn't just about making decisions—it's about bringing people together, solving problems, and navigating complex systems. Councillors quickly realized that skills from their previous careers and life experiences played a huge role in their effectiveness.

Key Takeaways

- **Communication and Mediation** – Public speaking, conflict resolution, and active listening were invaluable for engaging with residents, managing disputes, and leading discussions.
- **Leadership and Decision-Making** – Experience in leading teams, making tough calls, and thinking strategically gave councillors an edge in governance.
- **Understanding Government Processes/Regulations** – Those with prior government or regulatory experience had a head start in understanding policies, procedures, and legislative constraints.
- **Networking and Relationship-Building** – Building consensus, working with stakeholders, and maintaining strong relationships proved essential for getting things done.
- **Budget and Financial Literacy** – Understanding budgets, financial reports, and resource allocation helped councillors make informed decisions on municipal spending.



In Their Words:

“My background in project management has been invaluable—coordinating resources, understanding timelines and constraints, and bringing people together around a shared goal. These skills translate perfectly to municipal leadership.”

While every councillor brought a unique background to the table, those with strengths in communication, leadership, and strategic thinking found themselves better equipped to navigate the complexities of municipal governance.

Tapping into Institutional Knowledge: What Current Electeds Want You to Know

Knowing your specific municipality, are there any other insights you would like to provide?

Every municipality has its own unique challenges, but some lessons apply everywhere. Councillors reflected on their experiences and shared key takeaways for future leaders—highlighting the importance of staying engaged, thinking long-term, and being prepared for the realities of governance.

Key Takeaways

- **Importance of Community Engagement** – Staying visible, accessible, and actively involved in the community helps build trust and ensures councillors stay connected to the people they serve.

“Communities expect you to be present and visible beyond council meetings. Being out in the community and being involved helps you better understand the pulse of the community when making decisions.”

“Take time to talk with residents, business owners and municipal staff. This helps you develop a well-rounded view of issues before making decisions.”

- **Opportunities for More Training** – Many councillors felt underprepared when they started and wished they had more pre-election education and mentorship opportunities.

“New councillors would benefit from mentorship programs pairing them with experienced officials. I had to learn many lessons the hard way.”

“Understanding the Municipal Government Act and how it constrains what councils can legally do would have saved me from making unrealistic campaign promises.”

- **The Role of Personal Integrity** – Councillors stressed that integrity, honesty, and accountability are essential for building public confidence and making tough decisions.

“Always be honest with residents, even when the truth is unpopular. Your integrity is your most valuable asset as a public servant.”

“Transparency in decision-making builds trust. When residents understand why decisions were made, even unpopular choices become more acceptable.”

- **Managing Expectations with Bureaucracy** – Many councillors underestimated how slow and restrictive municipal processes can be, requiring patience, persistence, and creative problem-solving.

“The pace of government action surprised me. Important initiatives often take years rather than months, which can be frustrating when you want to make an impact.”

“Municipal processes exist for good reasons, but they can feel restrictive. Learning to work effectively within these systems takes patience.”

- **Long-Term Thinking Matters** – Big-picture decisions—even the unpopular ones—are what shape communities for years to come, making it critical to plan with the future in mind.

“The most meaningful work I’ve done as a councillor won’t show results until years after my term ends. Think beyond election cycles when making decisions.”

“Short-term popularity often conflicts with long-term community needs. Having the courage to make necessary but unpopular decisions is part of the job.”

For councillors, success wasn’t just about what they accomplished during their term, but about laying the groundwork for future growth, stronger communities, and a more effective local government.

CONCLUSION

The survey underscores that serving as a municipal councillor is a multifaceted, demanding role. While challenging, it is also deeply rewarding. Municipal elected officials face constraints, public scrutiny, and competing priorities, but they also have unique opportunities to shape their communities' futures and improve residents' daily lives. As we look ahead to the 2025 municipal elections, the insights provided will shape the content of future training and help prepare new candidates for the realities of governance.

Based on these findings, we encourage all future municipal candidates to attend the upcoming webinars and take advantage of the networking and learning opportunities available. Together, we can continue to build stronger, more resilient local governments.

What's Next?

- **Upcoming Webinars:** Starting in April 2025, we'll host a series of webinars tailored to different municipality types and governance contexts.
- **Information Materials:** One-page guides and resources for potential candidates will be available through RMA and ABmunis.
- **Online Resources:** Recordings and supplementary materials will be accessible on our websites.

We encourage all potential municipal candidates to take advantage of these resources. Together, we can build stronger, more effective local governments that truly serve Alberta's communities.

