Municipal Governance for Northern Communities: Perspectives from Saskatchewan

JOSEPH GARCEA

Introduction

What is the condition of municipal governance in northern communities in Saskatchewan? Is it adequate to meet the needs of northern communities in light of traditional and emerging challenges? If not, what can be done to improve the condition of governance? These were essentially the questions that were addressed by Saskatchewan's Task Force on Municipal Legislative Renewal in its final report titled Options 2000: A Framework for Municipal Renewal (Northern Sector). The Task Force was created in 1998 by the provincial government to examine the need for and nature of municipal reform in northern as well as in southern Saskatchewan. The Task Force decided to examine and make recommendation on the need for and nature of municipal reforms in northern and southern Saskatchewan in separate review processes and reports. The central objectives of this paper are threefold: first, to explain the nature of the Task Force's review process in northern Saskatchewan; second, to explain its observations on the need for municipal renewal, and third, to explain its recommendations for municipal renewal. A full appreciation of those three sets of explanations requires an understanding of the evolution of the municipal system in northern Saskatchewan and the factors that led to the creation of the Task Force on Municipal Legislative Renewal.

Evolution of the Municipal System in Northern Saskatchewan

The municipal system in northern Saskatchewan is essentially a product of various developments in the post-World War II era. It is during this era that the bulk of the municipal units were established or at least incorporated as municipalities or quasi-municipalities. Moreover, it is during this era that there has been a gradual progression from total provincial control toward greater, though generally by no means extensive, local control. The progression has consisted of five major stages (Saskatchewan, 2000: 2-4). The first stage occurred during the late 1940s with the enactment of the Northern Administration Act in 1948, which empowered the Department of Natural Re-

sources to provide local services and community planning and growth for the entire provincial North. The second stage occurred in the 1950s when the larger population centres such as LaRonge, Creighton, and Uranium City became self-governing villages and towns. The third stage occurred during the 1960s when the Northern Administration Act was amended to allow for the creation of Local Community Authorities and Local Advisory Councils as a means of engendering some limited community input into the local governance process. The fourth stage was the creation of the Department of Northern Saskatchewan in the 1970s. The Department, created by the New Democratic Party government headed by Premier Allan Blakeney, was responsible both for delivering all services and programs in the North and also for supporting the creation and development of local governments. Toward that end, the provincial government created the Northern Municipal Council whose core mandate was to provide advice and resources to the existing local government councils in the North, and administrative services to the smaller communities that did not have local government councils (Saskatchewan, 1977). The fifth stage occurred in the 1980s when the Department of Northern Saskatchewan undertook extensive consultations with northern community leaders to provide more autonomous and accountable local government (Saskatchewan, 1980a). To facilitate those consultations, the Department of Northern Saskatchewan prepared an issues and options paper titled Options 80 (Saskatchewan, 1980b: 1-8), which outlined the following six options for local government:

1. The retention of the existing local government framework under the Northern Administration Act and the Northern Municipal Council. That framework included four types of municipal governing or advisory entities: Urban Municipalities, Local Community Authorities, Local Advisory Committees, and the Northern Municipal Council.

2. The elimination of the Northern Municipal Council from the existing local government framework and the addition of two types of local governing councils for small communities.

3. The creation of a one-tier regional municipal government responsible for all municipal functions at the local and regional levels.

4. The creation of a two-tier municipal regional governance system comprised of four regional councils responsible for five municipal functions including health and hospital facilities, and four types of local municipal councils responsible for all other mandatory and optional local governance functions.

5. The creation of a three-tier municipal governance system, con-

sisting of everything contained in Option 4 supplemented by a Northern Municipal Council acting in an advocacy role for the entire northern part of the province.

6. The creation of a two-tier municipal governance system consisting of the following: (a) four regional councils elected at-large responsible only for planning and zoning for their particular region and all the municipal districts therein; and (b) several district or county governments within each of the four regions that would be responsible for all other mandatory and optional municipal functions (as well as education, health services, and hospital facilities).

The consultation process led to the enactment of the Northern Municipalities Act by the Conservative government of Premier Grant Devine in 1983, which established the current system of municipalities and municipal governance in northern Saskatchewan. The municipal systems consists of twenty-seven municipalities (two towns with a minimum population of 500, thirteen villages with a minimum population of 100, and nine hamlets with a minimum population of 30) and eleven settlements with a population of less than thirty. The various types of municipalities and quasi-municipalities have varying degrees of authority and autonomy in governing their respective communities. Councils of the smaller villages and hamlets have very little authority and autonomy and they rely heavily on provincial municipal officials both for advice and for performing some of the key administrative functions.

Three years after the enactment of the Northern Municipalities Act, some attention was devoted to the nature of the municipal system in northern Saskatchewan by the Local Government Finance Commission (Saskatchewan, 1986: 266-269). In a brief section of its final report devoted to northern municipal governance, the Commission noted that northern municipal governments faced several major challenges such as a limited property tax assessment bases, high levels of unemployment, high levels of social problems, and high costs for capital projects and operational purposes. The Commission concluded that, given the magnitude and seriousness of the economic and social conditions in northern Saskatchewan, it was imperative that a special review of municipal governance should be undertaken in the near future. The Commission indicated that such a review should devote attention to a series of interrelated issues including the structures, functions, financing, and powers of municipal governments. No such review was undertaken until the Task Force on Municipal Legislative Renewal was established twelve years later as part of an overall review of the entire municipal system in the province. Importantly, the Task Force found that the needs of northern communities and municipal gov-

ernments had changed very little in the interim. The problems and challenges identified by the Local Government Finance Commission persisted. Whether they were more tractable at the turn of the twenty-first century than they had been in the past was an issue of considerable debate. For its part, the Task Force on Municipal Legislative Renewal postulated that their tractability was more a function of political will on the part of the various orders of government to adopt and implement major reforms than of any other factors. In outlining the requirements for municipal reform in northern Saskatchewan the Task Force identified the following set of major factors: (a) a comprehensive and appropriate municipal reform plan; (b) a central focus on the public interest, rather than on private or partisan interests; (c) effective leadership by all governmental and community leaders; (d) bold initiatives and bold compromises by all such leaders; (e) understanding the context of municipal governance; (f) reform of both the provincial and local government sectors; (g) appropriate policies and programs by provincial and local governments; (h) appropriate balance of local and regional governance; and (i) appropriate approaches to reform that embody principles of transparency, openness, advance notice, and adequate consultations (Saskatchewan, 2000: 8-10).

The Process of Municipal Reform

One of the major issues that emerged for the Task Force in examining the need for and nature of municipal reform in northern Saskatchewan was the process that it would use to consult with key stakeholders and members of the various communities. The consultation experiences of the Task Force are quite instructive for future reform initiatives in the provincial North.

Consultations with Governments

In its efforts to solicit information regarding the need for and nature of municipal reform in northern Saskatchewan, the Task Force organized two major sets of consultations, one with municipal governments and the other with communities. The consultations with municipal governments used several different formats—namely meetings and survey questionnaires. Both in the case of the meetings and in the survey questionnaires the basic objectives were the same: to solicit the views of municipal officials regarding the need for and nature of municipal reforms. Some meetings were organized exclusively with the executive of the Saskatchewan Northern Municipalities Association, and others were organized with both the executive and its general membership during the Association's annual conferences. Those particular consultations were supplemented from time to time by meetings with members of various municipal councils and administrative officials whom Task Force members and staff felt

could provide some valuable insights both on matters related to processes for consultations and directions for reform. In addition, survey question-naires were mailed to all municipal councils in northern Saskatchewan to give them each the opportunity to communicate their respective views. Recognizing the need to develop a municipal governance framework that could work in consonance with the existing Aboriginal governance frame-work involving both First Nations and the Métis Nation, the Task Force broached the issue of municipal reform with their provincial organizations but, in both cases, the response was that, although municipal reform was important, it was something that they preferred to leave to the municipal representatives and their associations to address because they had other important issues to deal with and limited resources with which to do so.

   Consultations with Communities

In an effort to facilitate consultations with communities, the Task Force decided to travel to some northern communities in each of the major re-gions of northern Saskatchewan. Although the travel was not very valu-able either in orienting a substantial number of the members of northern communities to the focus and goals of the municipal reform initiative, or in eliciting their views on the need for and nature of municipal reform, it was valuable for at least one important purpose. The travel gave the Task Force panel a much better understanding of the major issues and options related to the need for and nature of municipal reform. The travel also helped the panel members to see the nature and conditions of various types of northern communities and to get a better sense of the number and nature of linkages between them.

   Neither the consultations with northern municipal governments nor those with their communities were either as easy or as useful as they should have been. There were two major reasons for this. The first, and most significant reason, is that both the meetings and the survey question-naires involving municipal government officials were much more useful for compiling the grievances that those municipal officials had with both the state of the municipal system and the state of their relationship with other orders of government, than in identifying potential directions for reform. Unfortunately, in most cases it was difficult to move such officials beyond the recitation of the litany of complaints to the identification of vi-able options for reform. The second reason is that the Task Force and the Saskatchewan Association of Northern Communities (SANC) were unable to work together as effectively as would have been desirable. This stem-med from the fact that Task Force was not prepared to accede to the de-mand of the SANC executive that the former transfer substantial funds to the latter to cover the cost of conducting its own community consultations.

In explaining its position, the Task Force noted that it could not accede to that demand for three main reasons. First, it did not have the authority to transfer any part of its budget to others for their own consultations. Second, it would be difficult for the Task Force to make such funds available to one organization but not to others for that purpose. Third, it could not afford to devote so much money to conducting consultations in one region of the province. When the Task Force did not accede to its demands, SANC decided to boycott the community consultations process. Ultimately, the boycott did not have much of an effect: while it did not help, it did not hurt very much either. The reason is that, while the official position of SANC was to boycott the Task Force consultation process, the unofficial position was not to do anything that would hamper the efforts of any local council or their communities to participate in the consultations.

Notwithstanding their problems and limitations, the consultations with northern municipal governments proved to be more successful than the consultations with communities. The Task Force found it very difficult to spark public interest in the meetings. Indeed, with the exception of one or two communities where there was substantial community participation, the consultations with communities turned out to be largely consultations with municipal government officials. Generally most people felt their participation was not needed. Indeed, the prevailing view seemed to be that if any issues needed to be addressed they would be taken care of by the municipal officials who were in the best position to do it. The thinking among the attentive members of such communities was that this was a provincial and municipal government issue and they had to sort it out among themselves and that there was, therefore, little real need for the public to get involved. The one exception was in the resort community of Denare Beach. Residents there had paid close attention to the work of the Task Force in southern Saskatchewan and they wanted to declare outright their opposition to any possible plan to amalgamate their community with neighbouring municipalities.

The Need for Municipal Reform

The Task Force's analysis on the need for municipal reform in northern Saskatchewan focussed on two major sets of needs, namely the needs of northern communities and the needs of northern governments. Its identification of those two needs was based largely on the views expressed by those who participated in the consultation process (Saskatchewan, 2000: 19-25).

Needs of Northern Communities

The Task Force identified three major sets of needs of northern communities that warranted reform in the municipal sector (Saskatchewan,

2000: 14-15). The first set of needs is improved municipal infrastructure including roads, water and waste management. Many remote and isolated northern communities still do not have adequate levels or quality of infra-structure that many southern communities have had for some time and deem to be standard. The second set of needs is increased availability of and improved condition of housing units. Many northern communities do not have enough housing units required for either permanent or transient populations. In many remote and isolated communities, existing housing tends to be structurally substandard or lacking in basic amenities. The third category of needs is improved community services such as educa-tion, recreation, and public and mental health. Many northern communi-ties do not have adequate educational, recreational and health programs that are considered essential for healthy communities.

Needs of Northern Governments

The Task Force also identified three major categories of needs of northern governments (Saskatchewan, 2000: 16-18). The first category is the need for financial resources. The vast majority of northern municipal governments have very limited financial resources. Neither local revenues nor transfers from other orders of government provide them with enough funds for operations or programming. The prospects for improvements to their financial problems are not good. There is generally little likelihood that there will be major economic improvements for more than a few municipal governments that would radically change the local, regional, or provincial economic conditions, which could, in turn, improve their fiscal situation.

The second major category is the need for human resources by north-ern governments. Most northern municipalities do not have the people with the skills needed to allow them to govern, plan and manage effective-ly. The result is often a reliance on individuals who do not have the requi-site understanding and skill sets to deal with obstacles and opportunities facing their communities. This particular problem stems largely from the fact that most northern municipalities do not have the financial resources to attract and retain trained professionals. A compounding problem is that the planning and administrative jobs in such small communities tend to be very limited in scope and are therefore not very attractive for highly trained professionals.

The third major category is their need for expanded jurisdictional authority. Northern municipal governments often have more limited jurisdiction and less autonomy because they are smaller. In this respect, they are treated the same as smaller municipal governments in the south-ern parts of the province. This, however, is probably the least significant problem because small municipalities tend not to have the money or the

people to do what is necessary now; they are not particularly interested in assuming further responsibilities without more money and more skilled personnel. After all, the fundamental problem is not their limited jurisdiction and autonomy, but their limited financial and human resources.

Collectively these needs constitute an organizational capacity problem. The key reform question therefore becomes, how can this problem of organizational capacity be remedied? Moreover, to what extent can improvements in the organizational capacity of northern municipal governments help meet the needs of their communities?

The Nature of Municipal Reform

With the foregoing two sets of needs in mind, the Task Force asserted that the overarching goal of municipal reform should be to explore the obstacles and opportunities facing northern governments to ensure that they can deal effectively, efficiently and equitably with the challenges and problems facing their communities. The Task Force added that, in keeping with that goal, the focus of reform should be on finding ways of improving the following key municipal capacities (Saskatchewan, 2000: 7):

- financial capacity;
- governance and management capacity;
- planning and development capacity;
- infrastructure and services provision capacity; and
- inter-governmental coordination capacity.

The Task Force postulated that to improve those key capacities to meet the needs of northern municipal governments and their respective communities, it would be necessary to establish an efficacious system of regional governance. It argued that a system of regional governance would be very useful for maximizing the organizational capacity in the municipal sector. Toward that end, the Task Force recommended reforms to the statutory, financial, geographic, and organizational frameworks of the municipal system. The major recommendation on the statutory framework for regional governance was a new statute that clearly articulated not only the purposes, functions, and powers of various types of regional municipal governments and authorities but also the processes for their creation, operation, and dissolution. The major recommendation for the financial framework was to establish a system of municipal finances that was consonant with and could sustain a regional system of municipal governance. The Task Force asserted that the establishment of an appropriate and acceptable financial framework was essential for the creation and operation of regional governance. The major recommendation for the geographic framework

was to identify what constitute logical regions for governance purposes. The Northern District in Saskatchewan constitutes nearly half of the entire province. It consists of approximately sixty communities, some of which are governed by municipal governments and some of which are governed by First Nation governments. The challenge for reformers is to identify the optimal boundaries for regional governance. Any boundaries that are established are not only likely to be contested but, to some extent, are also likely to be problematic. The litmus test for drawing regional boundaries should be whether one set of boundaries is likely to be substantially more useful than any other set. Ideally, policy rationality should prevail over political rationality in determining such boundaries. Whether it will remains to be seen.

The major recommendations for the organizational framework for regional governance was to establish a variety of organizational entities to perform various governance functions. This included the creation of any one or more of the following (Saskatchewan, 2000: 50-73):

- Regional municipal governments that would be comparable to such governments in other jurisdictions and whose principal role would be to perform a wide array of municipal governance functions.

- Regional municipal authorities whose principal role would be to perform one or more specific municipal or community governance, planning, development or service provision functions that can be best performed by special authorities rather than either a local or regional municipal government per se.

- Regional support services agencies whose principal role would be to provide planning, management and development functions for one or more regional municipal governments, as well as for the local municipal governments that existed within their boundaries.

- Regional coordinating agencies whose principal role would be to provide the requisite coordination among various orders and types of governments operating in northern local and regional communities. This includes the municipal governments, the provincial government, the Aboriginal governments (i.e., First Nations and Métis), and even the federal government.

Although the Task Force advocated the establishment of regional municipal governance that could include regional municipal governments, it was adamant that some system of local municipal governance had to be retained. In effect, it advocated a two- or multi-tier system of municipal governance, rather than a one-tier system per se. Notwithstanding the conventional arguments that two-tier municipal systems may contribute to some problems of coordination between the two levels

of municipal government and costly duplication, the Task Force asserted that the benefits of a two-tier system of municipal governance outweighed its costs. Its assertion was based on the belief that, in communities that do not have the requisite networks of community organizations to perform various community services and development functions, it is essential to ensure the continued existence of local municipal governments to perform representative, advocacy, and service provision functions for their local communities. Such local governments are deemed essential for providing their respective communities with the requisite "social capital" to ensure their social and economic sustainability.

In the foregoing recommendation the Task Force was, in effect, advocating finding an optimal balance in the alignment of roles and responsibilities between regional and local municipal governments. In a similar vein, it also advocated achieving a comparable balance in the alignment of roles and responsibilities between the regional and local municipal governments and each of the following: (a) other regional and local governing authorities or special-purposes bodies such as those in the health, education, and community services sectors; (b) the provincial government; (c) the Aboriginal governments; and (d) the federal government.

A major consideration behind the Task Force's recommendation to find an optimal balance between those various orders and types of government was that, in addition to imbalances, there is too much fragmentation in the governance framework of northern Saskatchewan. There are far too many governing entities performing various governance functions. The Task Force postulated that such fragmentation contributes to highly problematical governance capacity and to coordination problems that impede good governance and, ultimately, good social and economic development.

Conclusions

To date none of the Task Force's aforementioned recommendations for regional governance or for any other facet of the municipal system in northern Saskatchewan has been implemented, and all indications are that it is unlikely that any will be implemented in the near future. The lack of progress on implementation of any of the Task Force's recommendations raises an important question: Why have such reform initiatives not been implemented, given the widespread recognition that there are serious problems within the municipal system that should be addressed? The most cogent answer is that there is a lack of consensus on the precise nature and scope of municipal reforms not only among elected and appointed municipal and provincial officials, but also between these and Aboriginal government officials who have an interest or a stake in what occurs in the municipal sector because directly or indirectly it affects them and their com-

munities. The lack of consensus among municipal and provincial officials on the nature and scope of municipal reforms is largely rooted in two key matters. The first is that they have substantially different views on what constitutes an optimal reform agenda. The second is that they do not trust the other's commitment to the efficacious implementation of a municipal reform agenda. The unfortunate result of the lack of consensus and trust is that northern municipal governments are operating at a suboptimal level in meeting both their own needs and those of their respective communities. If this does not change, northern Saskatchewan will remain a region of extensive potential but limited development.

Other jurisdictions may wish to consider both the extent to which their own northern regions share some of the same conditions as northern Saskatchewan and the extent to which the Task Force's recommendations are useful in framing a reform agenda for governance in their own northern regions. If they do so, one can only hope that the commitment of elected and appointed provincial and municipal officials to implementing the requisite reforms is stronger in their jurisdictions than it has been in Saskatchewan to date.

About the Author

Joseph Garcea, is an associate professor in the Department of Political Studies at the University of Saskatchewan <joe.garcea@usask.ca>. He served as Chair and Director of Research and Analysis of Saskatchewan's Task Force on Municipal Legislative Renewal.

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