

## **Economic Development**

The SARM Board continues to consider economic development for rural Saskatchewan as a high priority. Whenever possible an economic development component is included in convention and division meeting agendas.

SARM was represented on several groups involved in the promotion of economic development. These included the boards of the Saskatchewan Agrivision Corporation Inc. and the Saskatchewan Biofuels Development Council. As well, SARM is a member of the Saskatchewan Economic Development Association (SEDA) and Sask Tourism.

SARM President David Marit was appointed to the Enterprise Saskatchewan Board of Directors in 2008. The major organizational focus of Enterprise Saskatchewan is based on key sectors of the provincial economy. The agency's job, through additional sector participation, is to identify and monitor competitive advantages and disadvantages in each sector, and to prescribe appropriate actions and strategies to enhance Saskatchewan competitiveness and growth. As well, the agency is responsible for identifying barriers to Saskatchewan's growth and making recommendations on action to removing those barriers

As well, Vice President Jim Hallick was appointed to the Uranium Value Added Partnership. The Province established the twelve person committee to advise the government on further development of Saskatchewan's vast uranium resources. The partnership includes representatives from the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan, rural and urban municipalities, business, labour, First Nations, the environmental community and Canada's nuclear industry. The partnership is to provide a final report to the government by March 31, 2009. The report will include specific recommendations on value added opportunities best suited to the development of the uranium industry. SARM has been a long-time supporter of investigating industry opportunities. In 2006 SARM, in partnership with the University of Regina and SUMA, organized the two-day forum, *Exploring Saskatchewan's Nuclear Future*.

## **SARM Community Planner**

At the request of the members, a Community Planner, Autumn Story, was added to the SARM staff in 2008. Even though growth is positive for most municipalities, a way to accommodate growth in a planned and organized fashion is needed. Autumn provides advice and assistance to rural municipalities on issues related to land use and community planning. The services available are broad in scope and can be tailored to meet the needs of all RMs

## **Municipal Forum**

The Municipal Forum met twice in 2008. Partners in the forum are SARM, SUMA and the Department of Municipal Affairs. The Municipal Forum is a planning and decision-making forum on matters of importance to Saskatchewan municipalities. Some of the issues discussed in 2008 included: the Municipal Sector Strategic

Plan, infrastructure programs, revenue sharing, Enterprise Saskatchewan, Municipal Capacity Development Program and Advisory Services.

### **Control of Richardson Ground Squirrels**

A one-year emergency registration for the use of 2% liquid strychnine by producers was granted by the Pesticide Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA) in rural municipalities experiencing severe RGS infestations. Included in the initial announcement were 56 municipalities. Additions to that number brought the final total to 171. This was a major break through as strychnine in its liquid form has not been available to producers since its use was restricted in 1992. In December, 2008 the province received approval from PMRA of their application for another emergency registration for 2009.

The first year of a multi-faceted research project on the control of RGS began in 2008. The research conducted in 2008 was entirely funded by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture (\$380,000). It looked at the following three areas: a review of control methods and severity of the RGS problem, the effectiveness of existing control products, relationships among predators, prey and habitat use. On behalf of the RGS Integrated Pest Management Steering Committee, SARM made application and was approved for funding, in the amount of \$419,868, under the Federal Advancing Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food Saskatchewan (ACAAFS) program. As well, the Alberta Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development have contributed \$144,955. This funding will be used to continue the research for two more years.

In October the Ministry of Agriculture announced the Gopher Control Rebate program which reimbursed producers for 50 per cent of the cost of eligible gopher control products purchased and used between August 1, 2007 and October 1, 2008.

SARM will continue to lobby for continuation of producer access to 2% liquid strychnine until an effective, economic, environmentally favourable alternative is found.

### **Education Tax on Property**

While we have come a long way in the past few years on addressing the issue of education tax on property, this matter is still not settled. We were pleased that Jim Reiter, MLA for Rosetown-Elrose, had been appointed to review this issue and bring a report to the Minister of Education in early 2009.

SARM has continued to work as a member of the Education Tax Coalition – a group that was formed in 2005. The Provincial Association of Resort Communities, SUMA, the Chamber of Commerce, the Saskatchewan School Boards Association, and the Association of Saskatchewan Realtors are the other members of the Coalition. The coalition sent a letter to Mr. Reiter in September confirming the core principles of the group:

- The financial stability and continued enhancement of the K-12 education system must be considered paramount for the success of this province and its people.
- Property tax is a tax on capital and is therefore regressive and restricts growth.
- Changes to the education tax system must be sustainable.
- Property taxes must be predictable year to year.

The letter proposed that the provincial share of property tax increase to 65% in 2009, 70% in 2010 and 75% in 2011.

SARM continues to identify the fact that in the process of increasing the provincial share of the education property tax bill, the province must continue to give special recognition to the disproportionate amount paid by agriculture property.

### **School Closures**

We continued to work with the Save Our Schools committee on the school closure issue. The province passed amendments to *The Education Act* related to the process for the closures of rural schools. The amendments call for moving the notification deadline from February to October and the formation of school review committees. SARM voiced its disappointment with the amendments. Since the proposed committees will have no authority we are concerned that they will be no more than a buffer between the public and the school board. Instead of a school “closure” process, we believe what is needed is a school “retention” process. With the provincial economy on a roll, and people moving back to rural Saskatchewan, school enrolment in many communities under review will be increasing. We must allow time for this to happen before we closing schools.

### **Municipal Infrastructure**

The economic boom of the past few years has put a great deal of pressure on our municipal roads. SARM has been working hard to impress on the provincial government that municipalities cannot be expected to continue to carry the lion’s share of the cost of building and maintaining the municipal infrastructure. The province is a large beneficiary of the sale of the agriculture products and natural resources that are carried to market across municipal roads. SARM has asked the province to step up to the plate with increases in grants for municipal infrastructure. Immediately following the 2008 Midterm Convention SARM sent a letter to the Premier expressing a need for capital infrastructure grants for 2009-10 in the amount of \$95 million.

### **Municipal Bridges**

A municipal bridge inspection program was carried out in Division 4 during 2008. The inspection program was carried out to update the database on the bridges and to enable municipalities to more accurately predict their future maintenance

requirements. The inspections were carried out by Stantec Engineering and revealed a number of serious problems. As a result of the inspections several bridges were closed and a number had weight restrictions imposed.

The 2008 bridge inspection program cost a total of \$600,000. We plan to carry out a similar inspection program in 2009 with the intention of having all bridges inspected within the next three to four years. The bridges on Class 7 roads are not included in the inspections.

As well, in 2008 Associated Engineering was contracted to do a bridge and culvert inventory replacement evaluation. Their report looked at the engineered life span of each bridge and culvert and based on that information calculated the cost of replacing these structures on an annual basis. The report revealed that the cost to replace the bridges and culverts that are presently passed their life expectancy is \$85 million. At the same time we have more of these structures reaching that replacement age each year. A copy of this report can be found on the SARM website.

### **Revenue Sharing**

Through the Municipal Sector Strategic Plan, SARM has been working with SUMA and the province to establish a formula that would tie municipal Revenue Sharing to the provincial economy. After many meetings during the past year we feel that a great deal progress has been made. We fully expect that the provincial budget will reflect a significant increase in municipal revenue sharing and an assurance of future funding that is predictable. It is our hope that this is the last year that municipalities will have to wait for budget day to find out what their Revenue Sharing Grant will be for the year.