

Municipal District of Bonnyville Reeve's Message June 9, 2014

Say "NO" to regional government

Municipal District of Bonnyville residents have to ask ourselves, "If the M.D. had a lower tax base, would neighbouring urban municipalities want to join with us in a regional government configuration"? The truth is – they wouldn't.

So why are the Mayor and Council of the City of Cold Lake leading the charge for regional government and assessment sharing? Urban municipalities are seeing the rural municipalities (M.D.) as a cash cow. We are receiving taxes on pipelines, power transmission lines and gas pipelines (linear assessment). For the most part, none of these are in cities, towns or villages. The urban municipalities say "You have more than we do, so you have to share."

Were they there to help us when the oil was not around and the rural municipalities were having difficulties making ends meet? I think not. Do they say "We'll help you with your 2,600 km of roads that industry is damaging?" No, of course not. In fact the comment "The M.D. spends way too much money on their roads" was made only last year by our neighbours to the east.

The big winners in the move to regional government, if it comes to fruition, will be the large cities, not Cold Lake or the Town of Bonnyville. Small villages can start licking their wounds now, because they will be the worst off. Nobody will be talking to them or about them. They will no longer have their rural friends to help them. The rural municipalities will be too busy trying to make ends meet, because they will have lost a large portion of their revenues.

As M.D. residents, we have everything to lose and nothing to gain from regional government.

Lac La Biche has a "regional government". They consolidated their County and the Town of Lac La Biche a few years ago. Are they happy? Depends who you ask. The town people and the business people living close to town are ecstatic. The people living further away from the town are saying it's the worst thing they could have done. Why? Because the bulk of the money is spent on town (urban) capital projects and it's supported by the folks living close to town. The rest of the municipality is doing without because there is no money for them. With representation by numbers, (which is how Wards are selected), they lose out and the money is controlled by those residents from town and living near the town. So now, if the rural taxpayers want cold mix, dust control or pavement guess what? They have to pay for it or go without. They have lost most of the services they used to take for granted because their voice has been reduced to a minority.

Want to talk about the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (Fort McMurray)? Ask Conklin, Anzac or Janvier what they have received from their municipal government lately. I'll venture a guess – not much.

Want to talk about Strathcona County? This municipality did not form a regional government with Sherwood Park. Sherwood Park was always a hamlet and part of Strathcona County. That's why today, Sherwood Park is probably the largest hamlet in Canada.

Want to talk about how to divide the M.D. of Bonnyville? Mayor Copeland has made this clear more than once in our local newspaper and other media venues. He says the M.D. of Bonnyville should be split (according to him, probably at Ardmore) with the east portion going to the City of Cold Lake to become Cold Lake County and the western portion going to the Town of Bonnyville and becoming Bonnyville County. Neat, right? All that is needed now is a ribbon and a bow.

This effectively eliminates any possibility of M.D. residents being able to garner enough support to have an effective voice in either government. This is a neat way to shut voters up and take their money. Do not fool yourselves, this is all about money. They do not plan to give us any either, but to take as much as possible.

At some point, the entire issue will fall upon the provincial government to decide, but rural municipalities across the province will fight against it. The urban municipalities will push as hard as possible because they are calling it a “sustainability fund”. Funny how “rural sustainability” is not as important as “urban sustainability”.

Don't let your local MLA off the hook on this one either. Better yet, don't support anyone in the next provincial election, who will not support your municipality. Ask the question, “Do you support regional government? Are you going to take our assessment and give it away?”

The M.D of Bonnyville Council is committed to regional cooperation. Council has supported many regional endeavours and continues to do so. Projects such as the current Regional Water Line, Beaver River Regional Waste Commission, Bonnyville Regional Fire Authority, Bonnyville Municipal Ambulance, the two Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) in Cold Lake and Bonnyville, and the libraries in both municipalities to name a few.

In addition the M.D. provides funds for regional projects such as \$1 million to the new FCSS building in Cold Lake, an annual grant of \$20,000 each to the three Agricultural Societies in Glendon, Bonnyville and Cold Lake, over \$300,000 to Glendon for the repairs needed to their arena, and about \$1 million to support the Bonnyville and District Centennial Centre annually.

In addition, we also have the Regional Community Development Agreement which provides an annual grant to the Village of Glendon and the Town of Bonnyville. This year Glendon will receive \$126,528 and Bonnyville will get \$860,538. The City of Cold Lake refused to sign this nine-year agreement.

Unless residents tell Council otherwise, we will continue to defend and protect the integrity of the M.D. of Bonnyville. Council will not take a “wait and see” attitude because the forces from the urban municipalities far outweigh the rural, so Council has to be very vocal about this issue. Do not miss the opportunity to talk to as many provincial MLAs as possible, as well as your own M.D. Councillors. Make sure as many people as possible are on the same page as you are.

This is not just a Bonnyville/Cold Lake issue. This will affect all rural municipalities in Alberta. I trust Council will persevere, and provincial politicians will be concerned about losing your votes if they do not support our rural residents.

First the M.D. of Bonnyville gave Cold Lake the tax revenue from 4 Wing Cold Lake to help them be sustainable. Then Cold Lake received the tax funding from the Air Weapons Range to make them sustainable. Now Cold Lake would have the M.D. give our industrial assessment to support the urban folks.

Enough is enough. It is time to say “NO to regional government” and argue for our own sustainability.

Reeve Ed Rondeau