

Cape Breton Post - Letter to the Editor

September 24, 2013

UNSM Has Not been Silent with the Premier on Municipal Issues *Councillor Russell Walker, President, Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities*

On behalf of the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities (UNSM), I would like to respond to your article of September 21 that quotes Premier Dexter as saying he thinks the UNSM is supportive of the current equalization program because he has not heard from us. This is not true.

The UNSM has made it very clear to the provincial government that a new deal for municipalities is required. This boils down to roles and responsibilities - who pays for what and what services should each order of government provide? It also requires municipalities to have the ability to raise sufficient revenues to cover their responsibilities. Equalization is an important piece of this puzzle.

Our residents have high expectation of municipalities in terms of service levels, yet our ability to pay for them is limited. Consider the fact that 65 per cent of the infrastructure in Canada is owned by municipalities, yet municipalities only receive 8 cents of every tax dollar collected. On top of that, the Province forces municipalities to pay for provincial services of education, housing and corrections which eats up almost 18 per cent of municipal budgets. Moreover, municipalities will have to pay for wastewater system upgrades which will be in the millions of dollars. In CBRM alone, that figure is estimated at over \$400 million.

To address these challenges, the UNSM is working on a number of initiatives.

Firstly, we met with the Premier earlier this year to discuss the possibility of reinstating an MOU between the Province and municipalities. The MOU would have the Province limit municipal payments to education and have the Province take over housing and corrections. We were simply asking to bring back this MOU which was dismantled by the Premier in order to support the Province's Back to Balance initiative. If the Province would prefer to assist financially in other ways, the UNSM would be open to that discussion. While the Premier indicated he would consider our request, we have not heard from him since our meeting in May 2013.

We are participating with the Province on a Fiscal Review project to examine all provincial programs provided to municipalities, including equalization. The Province indicated that there will be no new money allocated towards these provincial programs. Yet, in the analysis undertaken, it is clear that significantly more municipal money will be required to fund regulations imposed by both the federal and provincial governments. Without new money from the province, there are no real solutions. The UNSM has written the Province indicating this is unacceptable.

The UNSM has written all three leaders of the political parties as part of an election strategy requesting answers to a number of important questions for municipalities. Our biggest ask, which we feel is reasonable, is for the Province to work with the UNSM and municipalities to develop a long term strategy for municipalities. We hope the Government elected will heed our concerns.

The UNSM is a not-for-profit organization representing the provincial interests of municipal governments across Nova Scotia. Total membership is 411 elected officials representing all 54 municipalities.

