

Recommendations on the Future of Intermunicipal Collaboration



 **Alberta
Municipalities**
Strength
In Members

Approved by Alberta Municipalities Board August 2023

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	4
Purpose.....	5
Future of Municipal Government Project	5
Background	6
Recommendations.....	7
Changes to Policy and Legislation	7
1. Definition Clarity	7
2. Accountability to the MGA.....	8
3. Non-Contiguous Neighbour Collaborations and Amalgamations	8
4. Tools to Support Cost-Sharing	9
Changes to Funding Programs and Capacity-Building Supports.....	10
1. Funding Programs	10
2. Capacity-Building Supports	11
Best Practices to Support Effective Collaboration	12
1. Create a Culture of Collaboration	12
2. Get to Know Each Other	13
3. Be Strategic About Your Collaborations	13
Topics Requiring Further Consideration	14
1. Associations to Model Collaboration	14
2. Broader Collaborations	14
3. Amalgamation	14
4. Mediation and Arbitration Bias	15
5. Library Services.....	15
6. Viability	15
Summary	15

Executive Summary

Alberta Municipalities (ABmunis) has undertaken the [Future of Municipal Government](#) (FOMG) project to explore options for addressing critical municipal issues, such as municipal structure, climate adaptation, and leadership. One early outcome from the FOMG project is the reaffirmation that collaboration is an essential element of municipal governance. This report makes collaboration recommendations based on the common themes we heard from municipalities (ABmunis members and other municipalities) about their experience with Intermunicipal Collaboration Frameworks (ICFs).

The report outlines recommendations for improving intermunicipal collaboration in Alberta through:

- Changes to policy and legislation.
- Updates to funding programs and capacity-building tools.
- Best practices for collaboration.
- Topics requiring further consideration.

The report highlights the need for the provincial government to:

- Provide greater clarity and specific definitions in legislation.
- Improve the dispute resolution framework in legislation.
- Require accountability to ICFs.
- Provide funding for facilitation to support collaboration efforts both during ICF negotiations and in proactive relationship-building.

Many municipalities have a limited capacity for collaboration, meaning that the province needs to invest in:

- Funding collaborative initiatives, amalgamation exploration and implementation, and Growth Management Boards (GMBs).
- Supporting ABmunis and the Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) to update the ICF Workbook based on best practices, and providing a database of ICF's.
- Collaborating with ABmunis and RMA to provide additional support for intermunicipal training, conflict resolution and facilitation, service delivery data and shared resources.

Municipalities themselves can foster good intermunicipal collaborations by:

- Creating a culture of collaboration, and normalizing using facilitation services.
- Getting to know neighbouring municipalities and partners.
- Being strategic about collaborations.

During engagement, municipalities also identified topics for further consideration, including collaboration potential between ABmunis and RMA, broader collaboration with non-municipal partners, and perceived mediator and arbitrator bias.

The recommendations in this report will inform ABmunis' submission for the upcoming provincial review of ICFs in fall 2023. They will also guide our ongoing work with Municipal Affairs, RMA, and other municipal partners to support collaboration.

Purpose

Collaboration is essential for municipalities in Alberta looking to tackle the challenges of municipal governance, including increasing service expectations from community members, downloading of responsibilities from the province, financial pressures, climate change and complex societal challenges. ABmunis has undertaken the FOMG project to explore options for addressing critical municipal issues.

Municipalities have shared their perspectives on how to improve current collaboration efforts, particularly ICFs. This report summarizes recommendations on how to optimize municipal collaboration and identifies actions for both the provincial and municipal levels of government, as well as the municipal associations.

The report is broken into four main recommendation sections:

1. Changes to policy and legislation.
2. Updates for funding programs and capacity building tools.
3. Best practices for intermunicipal collaboration.
4. Topics that require further consideration.

One early outcome from the FOMG project is the reaffirmation that collaboration is an essential element of municipal governance.

Future of Municipal Government Project

ABmunis publicly launched the FOMG project in 2022 in response to the wide array of pressures that municipalities face. We partnered with the School of Public Policy at the University of Calgary to develop research papers that would serve as the foundation for dialogue on how to mitigate these pressures. The FOMG project is intended to explore and assess the options for municipal government structures that enable municipalities to build thriving communities into the future. One of the main project findings is the reaffirmation that intermunicipal collaboration is key to success. More information about the project is available on the [ABmunis FOMG webpage](#).

This report supports the FOMG project by making key recommendations to strengthen intermunicipal collaboration. These recommendations were developed using engagement feedback from Alberta Municipalities' 2023 President's Summit on the Future of Municipal Government that included municipalities of all types and sizes from throughout Alberta, Alberta Municipalities' 2023 Summer Municipal Leaders Caucus, and ongoing dialogue with municipal officials and administrators. The recommendations will inform ABmunis' submission for the upcoming provincial review of ICFs in fall 2023. They will also guide our ongoing work with Municipal Affairs, RMA, and other municipal partners to support collaboration.

Background

Municipalities currently face a variety of challenges:

- Community members within a municipality are constantly changing and often have increasing expectations for service provision, resulting in significant budget pressures.
- Municipalities are subject to the downloading of responsibilities from the provincial government without any accompanying increase in funding sources and revenue.
- Municipalities are at the epicentre of many complex societal challenges like homelessness, extreme weather (fires and floods), and economic recession.

Municipalities' collective experience confirms that collaboration is essential to overcome these challenges. The *Municipal Government Act* (MGA) was amended in 2017 to require collaboration between neighbouring municipalities, leading to the completion of 440 ICFs.

While collaboration is a long-standing tradition in Alberta, ICFs are relatively new, and the municipal experience has been widely varied.

Including collaboration as a municipal purpose in the MGA meant that collaboration became mandated rather than voluntary, with specific requirements outlined in the legislation. Broadly, ICFs require municipalities to:

- Assess whether collaboration would bring better effectiveness and efficiency to service provision at a regional scale.
- Determine how service delivery will be provided when collaborating.
- Negotiate various other ICF agreement details, including a dispute resolution framework.

When intermunicipal collaboration was mandated through ICFs, each municipality had three years to complete both their ICF and, where applicable, an Intermunicipal Development Plan. Some municipalities had only one ICF to complete. Others had many – some municipal districts and counties had to complete upwards of 15 to 20 ICFs. Also, the timelines and details of what was required in ICFs changed over time and was impacted by the COVID pandemic. In the end, this change to the MGA triggered a significant amount of work across the province in a short period of time, with mixed outcomes – some enthusiastically successful, some not at all successful, and everything in between. Some of the earliest ICFs led the charge and set the expectations for what an ICF should include. Other ICFs were completed at a very high level, with limited details, to comply with the legislated timeline. Municipalities are also required to review their ICFs within seven years from initial signing, or sooner if the parties agreed to a specific review timeline in their ICF. ABmunis anticipates municipalities benefiting from lessons learned and best practices identified through these reviews.

Just as Alberta is a widely diverse province, the municipal experience of ICFs was widely varied. Some municipalities found the experience strengthened already strong collaborative relationships. For others, the ICFs added strain to already tense relationships, or created strain where none had existed before. And in some cases, ICFs opened the door to collaboration in a way that hadn't been available previously. In listening to our municipalities, we learned that there is no single way to successfully collaborate.

Regardless of the outcome, negotiating ICFs has been a new experience for all of Alberta's municipalities and, like most significant undertakings, this process will benefit from continuous reflection and improvement. Based on our learning from the first round of negotiations, ABmunis is recommending changes to ICF legislation as well as enhanced support for municipalities to improve the ICF experience for the upcoming mandatory reviews.

Recommendations

ABmunis learned through engagement that the ICF legislation needs more clarity in several areas to avoid disagreement on collaboration parameters. Municipalities also need more supports and tools to enable them to develop appropriate partnerships.

The legislation does not need to add rigidity, but rather clarity on what needs to be addressed in ICFs and flexibility around how each municipal collaboration finds solutions.

Changes to Policy and Legislation

The success of ICFs depends on the legislative framework that regulates them. Based on our learnings from the first round of ICF negotiations, ABmunis recommends several key legislative changes to enhance the effectiveness of municipal collaborations into the future.

1. Definition Clarity

- **Basic ICF Services:** **ABmunis recommends that a clear list of required ICF services be articulated in the legislation.** This list should include basic municipal services such as:
 - transportation,
 - water,
 - wastewater,
 - stormwater,
 - waste management,
 - emergency services,
 - recreation.

Legislation should also allow for other services to be addressed if necessary, such as libraries, cemeteries, school sites, and Family & Community Support Services (FCSS). The basic services are core to municipal service delivery and typically do not end at the municipal boundary. Residents and ratepayers benefit from municipalities assessing these services at a regional scale to determine the most effective service delivery arrangement. Like the MGA provisions for Intermunicipal Development Plans, if both municipalities agree that they do not need to address specific services in their ICF, it should not be mandatory to do so. We recommend that any existing agreement between municipalities that does not include certain topics should be upheld until the next official ICF review process at which time the municipalities would have the opportunity to reassess the decision.

- **Cost-sharing:** It is recommended that the legislation directly reference cost-sharing principles of fairness and equity. We also recommend adding to legislation that arbitrators “...must have regard for equitable sharing of costs...” rather than the current language of “...may have regard...”. Adding these principles provides guidance to the negotiations and makes it clear whether equity is a key factor in an arbitrator’s award.
- **GMB Municipalities:** For municipalities included in a GMB where any basic ICF service (as defined above) is not included in the GMB’s agreements and plans, we recommend that the MGA require they be addressed. Further work is required to better understand how best to address all basic services as each GMB may have other mechanisms that may be more appropriate. The feedback from municipalities is that it is important

that both the coordination and cost-sharing aspects of all basic ICF services be agreed to through some legal option (i.e., GMB resolution, ICF, or alternate binding agreement).

- **Third-Party Services: There is significant confusion and inconsistency as to how third-party services are addressed in ICFs. ABmunis recommends providing clear guidance on what types of third-party services should be included and in what circumstances.** Our intent is to enable municipalities to explore collaboration on cost-sharing to support intermunicipal services rather than intervene in service delivery. Many services provided by third parties offer community members and businesses essential services for a complete community. Considering these services as part of the ICF process helps support a more regional approach to service delivery. The collaboration process in these cases could involve school boards, health boards, agricultural societies, major companies, and non-profit organizations. It is not expected that all third-party services would be included or that third parties be included in ICF negotiations unless their involvement in discussing specific services is beneficial. However, the nature of third-party service delivery is complex, so further review is required before a clear legislative definition is created.
- **Dispute Resolution Requirements:** ICFs must include a dispute resolution process, with sample options provided in the ICF Workbook. However, many municipalities prefer to have a clearly defined, minimum-standard approach included in the legislation so that they can focus on negotiating the content of the ICF rather than the negotiation process, especially when relationships are strained.

2. Accountability to the MGA

- **Order to Comply:** In instances where arbitration awards have been made, but are not being followed, ABmunis recommends that the MGA require a Ministerial Order to ensure the municipalities in question comply with the arbitrator's award. Current practice shows that the Ministerial Order is discretionary, so municipalities whose neighbours are non-compliant must resort to applying for an order from the Court of King's Bench, which is time consuming. If a municipality applies for a judicial review of the arbitrator's award, we recommend that the municipality in question be required to comply with the award until the judicial review is complete.

3. Non-Contiguous Neighbour Collaborations and Amalgamations

ICFs are intended to support a more regional approach to service delivery. In some situations, having multiple municipalities party to an ICF, and even amalgamation, should be considered. The current legislation enables multi-party ICFs, but in practice few have been created.

- **Awareness:** Municipal Affairs, ABmunis, and RMA should continue to build awareness that ICFs can be used multi-laterally and there is no legislation limiting municipalities from collaborating with non-contiguous neighbours. Additional learnings from any existing multi-lateral ICFs should be developed and included in the ICF Workbook.
- **Regional Approach to Recreation:** Municipalities particularly struggle with coming to agreement on recreation cost-sharing partly because of the regional and diverse nature of the service. We recommend that municipalities explore recreation from a regional lens, mapping recreation facilities and usership across a region to determine where facilities are most needed and how to cost-share them fairly across larger areas.
- **Non-Contiguous Amalgamation:** Based on the feedback, non-contiguous amalgamation should be explored, along with its inclusion in legislation. The application process for non-contiguous amalgamation may require different information to demonstrate benefits and mitigate risks. Ultimately, amalgamations are at the discretion of the Minister and no change to that authority is recommended. However, flexibility in the legislation would allow municipalities in unique situations to explore what could work best for their area.
- **Interim Measures: For municipalities interested in non-contiguous amalgamation, we would like to emphasize that non-contiguous ICFs are a good place to begin.** Amalgamations are labour-intensive, so

starting to align systems (i.e., financial, IT, bylaws) and sharing resources can provide practical experience working together and be beneficial should amalgamation become possible.

4. Tools to Support Cost-Sharing

- **Cost-Sharing Options:** Many municipalities would like to see a set of recommended cost-sharing methods and ABmunis members passed a [2022 resolution](#) calling for guidance on this topic. Having a set of recommended best practices supported by Municipal Affairs, RMA, and ABmunis would allow municipalities to identify the type of cost-sharing most appropriate to their situation. We do not recommend instituting a cost-sharing formula that would apply to all municipalities because we know that one size does not fit all. Lessons from similar cost-sharing experiences, such as off-site levies, are pertinent. Municipalities must clearly define the service, its costs, and the benefitting areas (or catchment areas) for off-site levies. These cost-sharing options can also address what the benefit is – whether that is direct use, or the ability to use. For example, in some situations, benefit is defined by how much of a service each user consumes (i.e., water). In other situations, benefit is more about having the service available for use should it be needed (i.e., emergency or recreation). An additional consideration is whether the service is considered necessary to attract economic development or essential workers (i.e., doctors) who typically expect high quality regional services and amenities. Providing a toolkit with background information on how cost-sharing techniques are used, and why and how benefit can be determined, would help municipal collaboration by providing a resource to begin conversations.
- **Joint Development Initiatives:** While ICFs and many municipal collaborations are about cost-sharing, there are also opportunities to include joint development best practices. **Many intermunicipal collaborations are about more than just sharing costs; they seek to enhance the region's economic and community development. This means that municipalities should consider how to work together to attract business to their region.** In these cases, joint development agreements may support both municipalities actively engaging in economic development because both will share in the financial benefits. RMA's October 2022 Municipal Structures Report suggests the use of Joint Development Areas in concert with Intermunicipal Development Plans to identify development areas and share in the costs and revenues the area generates. The report also suggests the use of Joint Economic Development agreements that are similar in terms of costs and revenue, but more regional in nature rather than specific to a single area. The development of best practices for such tools would be a good resource.

Changes to Funding Programs and Capacity-Building Supports

In addition to legislative changes, municipalities need financial, knowledge, and skill supports to build capacity and enable effective collaboration efforts.

1. Funding Programs

Successful collaboration requires significant time and energy to build relationships and develop mutual understanding. Collaboration grants have been available for many years, but an additional focus on grants and timing is critical to support ongoing efforts.

- Additional Funding: Municipalities need additional funds above what is currently available for the sole purpose of collaboration. It is not enough to have grants available for those times when parties are in conflict. **Municipalities require additional funds to coordinate and prepare for collaboration during their ICF negotiations, which will help prevent conflict.** While grants are available, they are not adequate nor accessible to all who need them. Sufficient funding for ICFs would demonstrate the alignment of provincial priorities on this topic from the legislation to implementation. Grants should also be available for ICF situations where one municipality's financial resources are significantly different from their neighbours. In these situations, some municipalities did not actively participate in ICF negotiations because they could not afford to assess what was offered. Grants can be used to support equitable participation. It is recommended that ABmunis undertake an initiative to identify the gap in funding and make a specific funding request to the province.
- Efficient Process: The grant process should be streamlined and timelier. Municipalities need to know what funds are available, when applications are required, and how long it will take to access grant funds once an application has been submitted. Municipalities currently struggle with the grant process. **Collaborations are often time-sensitive processes that emerge quickly based on opportunities. Grants need to be available and accessible on an ongoing basis so they do not halt progress.**
- Amalgamation Funds: The costs associated with exploring amalgamation are high and municipalities need more financial support to adequately assess whether an amalgamation is feasible and appropriate.
- GMB Funding: **Like ICFs, the costs associated with coordinating and organizing collaboration for GMBs are high. Municipalities would like to see stable, predictable funding for GMBs.**
- Grant Criteria: There are currently grants available for collaboration initiatives. However, successful collaboration should be a significant criterion for other grant awards. We recognize that not all project funding can benefit from collaboration and so this recommendation is not intended to reduce opportunities where collaboration isn't appropriate. But where it is, applications submitted by more than one municipality should be preferred.



Stable and predictable funding is needed to build capacity for effective collaboration efforts.

2. Capacity-Building Supports

While funding support is a primary need for municipalities, there is also a need to help municipalities expand their capacity for collaboration.

- Updated ICF Workbook: The ICF Workbook, prepared in partnership by Municipal Affairs, RMA, and ABmunis, was a useful tool for the first round of ICF negotiations. Now, the workbook needs to be updated to reflect the practical experiences of the last five years and focus on best practices. The workbook will also need to be promoted again to raise municipal awareness of the tool. One specific recommendation is to include a template for a municipal realities report. This tool, developed by municipalities, outlines key information to be transparently shared with their negotiating partners and includes:
 - i. assessment base
 - ii. taxation base
 - iii. municipal priorities
 - iv. operating budget
 - v. overview of facilities and how much they cost.

Other tools could be developed including legally reviewed templates and processes for aspects of the ICF process including contracts and conflict resolution.

- Database of ICFs: Municipalities are looking for an inventory of existing ICFs including what topics were addressed, what cost-sharing arrangements were made, and what resource support was used including who facilitated the ICF negotiations.
- Regular Reviews: ICF legislation and best practices should be reviewed on a regular basis by the province to ensure continuous improvement and learnings are incorporated into subsequent rounds of ICF negotiations.
- Intermunicipal Collaboration Training: Elected officials often ask about whether training specific to collaboration can be offered. ABmunis currently partners with RMA to teach the Elected Officials Education Program's Regional Partnerships and Collaboration course, so greater awareness of this program could be fostered. Skill development is also a useful first step in intermunicipal collaborations and feedback from participants who take the course with their neighbouring municipalities has been positive. **Whichever way the training is delivered, broader intermunicipal collaboration training is frequently requested.**
- Conflict Resolution Option Awareness: **Destigmatizing mediation and arbitration will go a long way towards enabling municipalities to use these supports effectively.** Many municipalities suggested that having a neutral third-party facilitator lead the negotiation process is a key strategy in reaching a positive outcome. However, there seems to be a sense that municipalities have failed if they cannot collaborate without external help. We recommend Municipal Affairs continue to work with ABmunis and RMA to demonstrate the value these supports offer based on the real experiences of municipalities across Alberta.
- Facilitation Services: **Many municipalities have suggested collaborations would benefit greatly from a free facilitation service provided by the province, similar to community development facilitators.** Municipalities have had many positive experiences with community development facilitators, knowing that this service is readily available when needed and doesn't come with the burden of unknown costs. Municipalities would also benefit from having a roster of qualified facilitators in addition to the mediation/arbitration roster. Intermunicipal collaboration could be significantly more successful if municipalities had access to free/low-cost facilitators at the start of their work instead of waiting for things to fail and then bringing in a mediator.
- Support for Service Delivery Data: ICFs are dependent on the data that supports the negotiations. Municipalities have clearly said that more support is needed for cost-sharing models, and so too do they

need greater support for understanding their current service delivery levels, and what is expected of them by residents/ratepayers. There are already resources in place supporting service delivery data including recent asset management tools and training, and additional emphasis on these tools is warranted.

- **Shared Resources:** Shared systems and data is the first step to better collaboration. There is a clear benefit to municipalities working together to determine what financial, IT, and asset management data systems are used, and then aligning these systems so that data comparisons are more useful. Having apple-to-apple comparisons of data can mean the difference between getting to an agreement or stalling out. Municipalities have suggested that ABmunis and RMA could provide joint support for identifying recommendations for common systems.
- **Arbitration:** Municipalities are looking for greater clarity regarding how and when the Arbitration Act applies versus the MGA. Additional communications materials and education on how ICF arbitration works would be valuable.

Training, facilitation, shared resources, and destigmatizing mediation and arbitration are needed to expand municipalities capacity for collaboration.

Best Practices to Support Effective Collaboration

In addition to the recommendations above, municipalities have identified best practices that can be implemented in their everyday interactions to enhance collaboration. The following are some of the most frequently endorsed tips for municipalities to use today and into the future.

1. Create a Culture of Collaboration

- **Proactive Collaboration:** Municipalities should focus on the cultural aspects of collaboration. This means that relationships are built and fostered before any opportunities or challenges emerge. **Also, when new projects or opportunities do arise, partners should be brought to the table early so they participate in project ideation and key decisions impacting service delivery levels and funding options.**
- **Formal and/or Regular Arrangements:** One of the ways to foster ongoing relationships is to establish a cooperation protocol or a joint friendship committee that outlines the commitment to a relationship between two or more municipalities. These types of arrangements enable conversations that are far broader than those that focus only on ICF services and/or Intermunicipal Development Plans. Regular meetings between councils, joint friendship committees, and/or Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs) provide an opportunity to better understand each municipality's unique circumstances.
- **Collaboration at All Levels:** Collaboration cannot and should not only take place between elected officials. **We should encourage collaboration between all levels of staff in municipalities, from the CAO to the grader operators.** We recommend enabling staff to develop joint recommendations for collaboration and then the elected officials only need to work out the most politically important components.

- **The Right Attitude and the Right People:** The right structure and commitments can get people part of the way down the road to collaboration, but the right attitude is the magic ingredient. Of course, there is no single “right” attitude, but what tends to work is leaving egos at the door by being a champion for regional benefits; staying positive and believing that collaboration is possible; and being solution-oriented when inevitable challenges arise. This sometimes means that the “right” people must be involved. **The right people aren’t necessarily identified by their position; rather, they are the people that bring value to an initiative because they have the right set of skills for collaboration, as well as enough authority to make decisions and build momentum.**

2. Get to Know Each Other

- **Connect Socially:** Getting to know a neighbouring municipality’s elected officials and staff goes a long way to supporting all types of community initiatives. If opportunities to connect socially are limited, at a minimum, municipalities can build social time into meetings and plan to have meals together. Ideally, municipalities should work on a diverse range of community initiatives together, including community boards and organizations. This will help build relationships that are robust, but also interconnected. Even when relationships are good, understanding what is challenging for neighbouring municipalities goes a long way towards supporting successful collaboration.
- **Learn About Your Neighbouring Municipality:** In addition to spending time together socially, elected officials and staff should take the time to learn more about the municipalities in their region. Do field trips and tours together as part of collaboration. Meet with community groups and companies doing business in the region. Talk about what’s on each council’s agenda and strategic plan. **The more you understand about the opportunities and challenges your neighbour faces, the better you will be able to come up with joint solutions to regional issues.**

3. Be Strategic About Your Collaborations

For the most part, collaboration doesn’t just happen. It takes vision, planning, and coordination to execute successfully. There are many recommendations in the ICF Workbook that have guided the current round of collaborations and negotiations, and based on the feedback of municipalities, a few themes stand out.

- **Consider an ICF or a Potential Collaboration to be a Project:** Develop a strategic plan for the collaboration by working together to set goals, parameters, decision-making authority, roles and responsibilities, communication protocols, and metrics for success.
- **Plan for Data-Driven Decisions:** Wherever possible, prepare in advance the appropriate information and data that will be necessary to the conversation. If municipalities do not have the same types of data, or need neutral technical advice, consider hiring an external third party to prepare data to be used by both parties in the negotiations. Alternatively, work towards having similar information systems in place so data comparison and analysis are easier. Make sure decision-makers have the information and data in advance of meetings so they can prepare and even meet with their council to get feedback.
- **External Expertise:** Consider engaging appropriate expertise in facilitation, conflict management, and/or legal support for your situation. We have often heard that bringing in a neutral, third-party facilitator early on enabled a much more straightforward negotiation and supported team-oriented relationships. The facilitator can help you stay focused on your strategic objectives and create space for elected officials to focus on content rather than process. Legal support has also been highly recommended to ensure that agreements made through dialogue are supported by legal backing. It is critical to assess your municipality’s needs and ensure that your legal support matches your circumstances. The wrong support can make the process much more challenging.
- **Normalize Disagreements:** Conflict is almost always going to arise. Intermunicipal collaboration involves complex topics with large impacts to community members and ratepayers. There can be big stakes involved. **Differences of opinion and perspective are part of the experience, but ultimately, it is how you address conflict that matters.** Having a dispute resolution process in place is important so that when

disputes arise, there is an already-agreed-upon process to follow that is clear and known to all parties. **Then, focus on the issue, not the people involved.** Normalizing conflict can be done in many ways, but generally, it helps to assume that conflicts will arise, talk about how you will deal with conflict, stay calm, take breaks when needed, and stay committed to working through the hard discussions so that conflict isn't avoided, but managed.

Topics Requiring Further Consideration

During our engagement, we identified additional topics for discussion outside of the provincial and municipal roles in collaboration. We believe these topics should be further explored to determine how they can complement collaboration initiatives.

1. Associations to Model Collaboration

- Some municipal feedback highlighted a perception that the relationship between RMA and ABmunis is strained. Still, the two associations have demonstrated valuable strength when working together on common issues. Municipalities see this relationship as an opportunity for the associations to model collaboration to their members and show the benefits of collaboration at all levels. The associations can strengthen their relationship by jointly hosting events and intermunicipal conversations. We can also build on the success of the ICF Workbook by working together to update this important resource and coach municipalities on intermunicipal best practices.

2. Broader Collaborations

- Some municipalities have strong relationships with a wide variety of non-municipal partners, and the learnings drawn from ICFs can be used to enhance these existing relationships. For municipalities that do not have broad collaboration initiatives, it is suggested that they consider expanding their collaboration efforts to other interested parties, such as school boards, community-based non-governmental organizations, and businesses.
- We acknowledge that we are missing the participation of our Indigenous neighbours in both formal and informal municipal collaboration. **We therefore recommend that municipalities implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls To Action and start to build relationships with their Indigenous neighbours before expecting collaboration on regional issues.** ABmunis has developed a [Municipal Guide to the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions' Calls to Action](#) and regularly includes information on municipal-Indigenous relations at our events.

3. Amalgamation

- For many municipalities, changing the MGA to require collaboration has been viewed as a precursor to forced amalgamations. Some municipalities fear what ICFs will ultimately lead to and agree that forced amalgamations would not be the right approach for most municipalities in Alberta.** While municipalities generally support intermunicipal collaboration, cases of more difficult and less successful ICF negotiations tend to be highlighted in the media. **Municipalities would benefit from hearing ICF success stories to bolster perceptions about how well intermunicipal collaboration can work.**
- We also recognize that for some municipalities, amalgamation has potential value. There are many expectations and assumptions about what amalgamation will offer to communities exploring this option. To help municipalities better understand the risks and benefits of amalgamation, the province could develop and share case studies specific to Alberta. For municipalities exploring amalgamation, additional support should be offered, with incentives for amalgamation should they decide to pursue this option.

4. Mediation and Arbitration Bias

- Municipalities generally support the use of mediation and dispute resolution options. However, some municipalities raised concerns that conflict resolution professionals may have an urban bias. Their perception is that because many conflict resolution professionals live in urban centres, they have unconscious or inherent bias in favour of urban municipalities.
- While we understand that professionally designated mediators (QMed or CMed) and arbitrators (QArb and CArb) are guided by professional ethical standards, including non-bias, that are upheld by their regulatory board, we have a few recommendations to support their understanding of municipal dynamics:
 - i. We support having a diverse range of conflict resolution professionals available to municipalities through the Municipal Affairs Mediation and Arbitration Roster including locations in both rural and urban areas.
 - ii. We support requiring municipal mediators and arbitrators having specific municipal training on both urban and rural contexts.
 - iii. We support requiring mediators and arbitrators to have unconscious bias training.

5. Library Services

- Libraries are a unique service and often act as the community hub. We heard that municipalities would like Municipal Affairs to engage with municipalities on how to ensure support for equitable delivery of library services more broadly.

6. Viability

- Alberta is unique in having a viability review process that helps municipalities determine their ability to continue as a municipality or develop a plan that leads to viability. The process is intended to bring decision makers together and to enable communities to make decisions about their future based on an infrastructure study and viability review report. Municipal associations provided input on the development of the process and its evolution over the past decade. However, there is still opportunity for improvement.
- At their 2023 Convention, RMA members adopted a resolution to advocate for the Government of Alberta to enhance support for receiving municipalities in dissolutions resulting from the viability review process. Some ABmunis members have identified the need for greater support for those who decide to remain a municipality.
- The School of Public Policy is analyzing the process and outcomes of viability reviews and will release its findings in the fall, which provides the opportunity to discuss opportunities to enhance the process for all municipalities involved.

Summary

Collaboration is the preferred approach to address the challenges that municipalities currently face with respect to both service delivery and complex social, economic, and environmental issues.

The municipal experience with ICFs has highlighted the need for the provincial government to better support collaboration by providing clarity in legislation, adequate and streamlined funding programs, and capacity-building tools.

Municipalities should identify best practices for collaboration and take the time to invest in intermunicipal relationships. The recommendations and tips presented in this report aim to improve the experience of upcoming ICF renegotiations and promote enhanced collaborations between Alberta’s municipalities.





Alberta Municipalities Strength In Members

Connect

300, 8616 51 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T6E 6E6
780.433.4431 ■ 310.MUNI

abmunis.ca

