

COVID-19 Strategic Sharing Group: Water Utility Management Response

Meeting Date July 24, 2020 from 1:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m. EDT
Facilitator Sandra Cooke, Canadian Water Network

There were 17 municipalities participating from coast to coast (see the [attendee list](#)).

CWN has now hosted and facilitated 10 online meetings with members of the Municipal Consortium from across Canada to discuss water utility management response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The objective of the meeting was to share opportunities and challenges that municipalities and utilities have experienced and/or continue to experience in their response to COVID-19, including their perspectives on modified working arrangements and alternate service delivery approaches (see the [meeting agenda](#)).

This meeting focused on the sharing of knowledge and approaches that enabled quick learning and adaptation by municipal water leaders to the challenges faced by the sector. This meeting was the final one for this Strategic Sharing Group. Please note that CWN will reconvene this group if or when there are subsequent waves of the pandemic.

Municipal Consortium Project Manager, Jenessa Doherty, started the meeting with an update on the report on Water and Wastewater Utility Management Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic, including new information learned since the insights document was published in April 2020.

Following this update, Municipal Consortium Director, Sandra Cooke, kicked off the discussion by asking Strategic Sharing Group participants about their operational and business continuity plans and approaches moving forward. Key discussion points included modified working arrangements and alternate service delivery approaches that municipalities/utilities will continue implementing as they emerge from lockdown, observations on the benefits and challenges associated with these approaches, and potential opportunities to deliver utility services in a new way.

The meeting wrapped up with a brief overview of next steps for Canadian Water Network and the organization's continued focus on being agile and effective in supporting the municipal network across Canada in the coming months.

Below is a list of the specific themes that emerged from the Sharing Group discussion on moving forward as the country emerges from lockdown.

- **Financial Impacts and Revenue Projections**
 - Including: implementing or deferring rate increases, projected versus actual revenue impacts.

- **Continuation of Non-emergency Water Repairs/Services**
 - Including: Protocols for entering homes, re-structured home-entry processes, health screening.
- **Health and Safety and Ongoing PPE Considerations**
 - Including: PPE supply issues, mask requirements and considerations for field and operations staff, health and safety statistics throughout the pandemic.
- **Modified Work Conditions**
 - Including: Assessing needs for staff who are working from home, considerations for safely resuming training for staff, engaging and communicating with staff.

Summary of Municipal/Utility Actions

Discussion Topic: Moving Forward – Opportunities and Challenges as the Country Emerges from Lockdown

Municipalities and utilities across Canada generally continue to see a declining number of COVID-19 cases in their respective regions with many now in various stages of re-opening. With this being the final meeting of the Strategic Sharing Group, municipalities and utilities shared their key observations throughout the pandemic and provided updates on challenges, successes and approaches that are being implemented and/or evaluated that present new opportunities for utility service delivery. The key points discussed by participants are summarized below.

- Financial impacts have been a concern for many municipalities and utilities throughout the pandemic. Many had been generating revenue forecasts over the past few months in an effort to predict and respond to potential financial impacts. Several municipalities/utilities have now generated reports that detail the actual extent of financial impacts.
 - Municipalities/utilities who recently implemented **rate increases** identified that this action **helped reduce the impact of revenue declines**. Several municipalities/utilities who had delayed rate increases have decided to proceed with them in the Fall.
 - Several municipalities who had originally anticipated significant revenue impacts have now identified a number of **factors that have helped shore up some of the projected revenue losses** (e.g., dry weather leading to increased water consumption for applications such as lawn gardening).
 - For many municipalities/utilities in Ontario, hot, dry temperatures combined with an increase in household DIY projects during lockdown drove a higher-than-usual residential consumption of water. Depending on the utility's water rate structure, this consumption pattern either had a neutral or positive effect.

- Many municipalities/utilities had implemented water bill deferral programs. Post-meeting, one municipality reported on the parameters of their 3-month deferral program, which are listed below.
 - How the program worked: Installment plans have been offered by the utility to help eligible customers manage deferred payments for municipal services. If customers did not select an installment plan, then a 10-payment plan was set up for them. The utility payment deferral program ended in mid-June 2020.
 - Deferral installment plan details: Deferred balances are listed as a credit on the first bill that includes installment payments; deferred balances will then be divided into equal payments on consecutive bills; installment payments will be added to regular utility bill charges when they are due.
- One municipality is in the process of reviewing their portfolio projects and **developing key principles for how to consistently and fairly respond to change orders related to COVID-19**.
- In the initial phases of the pandemic, many municipalities/utilities temporarily discontinued in-home, non-emergency services such as lead testing and meter replacement programs for health and safety reasons. Many of these municipalities have since **resumed or are planning to resume these non-essential services under new or modified protocols** including contact tracing, strict PPE, and COVID-19 screening questions for customers which for some utilities are asked at the time the service appointment is booked, the day before the appointment, and when a utility representative is onsite.
 - Many municipalities/utilities are in the process of **exploring how to recover these programs using creative and innovative techniques** including virtual appointments to first assess the issue before sending a representative to a customer's residence.
- Some municipalities identified that part-way through the lockdown they recognized the need to **bring operations staff safely back to work to avoid degradation of treatment plants and systems**.
- As municipalities across the country continue to navigate re-opening, many are adopting **mandatory mask policies in public places**. Some municipalities/utilities have even indicated that **physical distancing and wearing a mask is becoming normalized**, not just in public places, but also in the workplace. That being said, some municipalities/utilities are in the process of updating work procedures/policies to ensure continued safety for staff and customers.
- Some municipalities indicated that **health and safety statistics are the best they have ever been**. They have significantly fewer sick days, while absenteeism, workplace injury, and hazards have all decreased.

- **The supply of certain types of PPE continues to be a challenge for some municipalities/utilities.** For some, acquisition of gloves is a concern. For others, acquisition of suitable types of masks in the required volumes is a concern. Some municipalities/utilities are moving toward [re-usable, washable BUFFS](#) in lieu of disposable face masks as employees have indicated they are more comfortable and easier to maintain.
- Modified working arrangements continue for many municipalities/utilities. The majority of participating municipalities/utilities have indicated that, for office staff, **working from home continues to be a successful approach** and many plan to keep office staff working from home for the foreseeable future or until a vaccine becomes available.
 - Some municipalities/utilities have divided staff into smaller teams that were then sent to work in different plants to minimize potential exposure to the virus. These utilities plan on continuing this type of modified working arrangement into the Fall and potentially for the remainder of the year.

Looking Ahead: Opportunities to Consider and Emerging Challenge Areas

- As municipalities/utilities across the country continue to move through phased re-opening, **the need to re-establish in-home water services is becoming a more critical reality.** Participants on the call expressed a desire to convene a meeting in the Fall that explores creative and innovative ways to conduct in-home water services in the new reality.
- Continuing staff training remains a challenge for some municipalities/utilities. As such, many are **exploring options for how they could conduct staff training safely**, including options for safe in-person training or opportunities for online integration of some training program elements.

Canadian Water Network's 
Canadian Municipal Water Consortium

Attendees

Municipality/Utility	Name
Alberta Capital Region Wastewater Commission	Mike Darbyshire
City of Brantford	Selvi Kongara
City of Calgary	Nancy Stalker
City of Guelph	Arun Hindupur
City of Hamilton	Nick Winters
City of Kitchener	Bu Lam
City of Ottawa	Tammy Rose
City of Regina	Greg Kuntz
City of Thunder Bay	Michelle Warywoda
City of Vancouver	Andrea Becker
City of Winnipeg	Tim Shanks
Durham Region	Janine DeBoer
EPCOR	Susan Ancel
EPCOR	Stephen Craik
Metro Vancouver	Cheryl Nelms
Metro Vancouver	Andjela Knezevic-Stevanovic
Region of Peel	Elaine Gilliland
Utilities Kingston	Allen Lucas
York Region	Jennifer Khemai
York Region	Beth Weir

Agenda

Agenda: COVID-19 Peer-sharing – Water Utility Management Response	
Friday July 24 th , 2020 1:00 – 2:00 pm EDT	
1:00 – 1:05 pm	<p>Welcome and Introductions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review call structure, update on action items, reaching out to your neighboring municipalities • Feedback survey
1:05 – 1:15 pm	<p>Summary of insights and activities for this Strategic Sharing Group from March 20 – July 24, 2020</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Insights document - Resources List
1:15 – 1:45 pm	<p>Discussion Topic: Moving forward</p> <p>What modified working arrangements and alternate service delivery approaches will your utility continue implementing as the country emerges from lockdown? Please share the benefits you have observed. What will be some of the challenges? Are there new opportunities to provide utility services in a new and novel way?</p>
1:45 – 1:55 pm	<p>Next steps for supporting the municipal network across Canada.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strategic Sharing Group on Levels of Service - Fall 2020 2. Wastewater Coalition Working Group(s) 3. Reports, Insights and Updates
1:55 – 2:00 pm	COVID-19 Wastewater Coalition update
2:00 pm	Adjourn