

COVID-19 Strategic Sharing Group: Water Utility Management Response

Meeting Date June 12, 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](#)).

The objective of the meeting was to exchange ideas and approaches for planning and prioritizing service delivery as parts of the country slowly begin to re-open. Since municipalities/utilities across the country are in different phases of the re-opening process, considerations for how to ensure health and safety, adopt new or evolving approaches to service delivery, and thrive in the new “normal” were shared among participants (see the [meeting agenda](#)).

Municipal Consortium Director, Sandra Cooke, started the meeting with a rapid fire roundtable concerning the re-opening procedures and prioritization practices/programs for various municipal water, wastewater and stormwater services. The second half of the meeting explored opportunities and considerations for the prioritization of stimulus funding and the extent to which municipalities/utilities are considering social, economic and environmental co-benefits within their prioritization capital planning.

Below is a list of the specific themes that emerged from the rapid-fire roundtable discussion on reopening and for priorities for stimulus funding:

- **Ensuring Health and Safety during phased re-opening**
 - Including: securement of adequate PPE supplies and the continued effective use by staff; challenges associated with staff being complacent with the use of PPE or protocols; sterilizing PPE to ensure supply (e.g. N95 masks); continuing to manage the logistics employee physical distancing
- **Evolving approaches to maintain services**
 - Including: office workspace redesigns to accommodate physical distancing are presenting a challenge and is costly; continued staggering or splitting of field and operations staff; Engineering staff continue to be very productive and are moving many design projects forward.
- **Re-opening safely and effectively**
 - Including: keeping office staff at home for foreseeable future, return-to-work plans for gradual re-introduction of staff to the workplace, risk profiles/assessments to prioritize bringing staff back, considerations for permanent updates/changes to staffing and services

Summary of Municipal/Utility Actions

Discussion Topic 1: Rapid Fire Roundtable – Re-opening

- **There is concern that scaling up will prove more challenging than going into lockdown.** Many utilities have or have started to draft recovery and retraction plans/scenarios moving forward during these highly uncertain times.
- **Municipalities/Utilities across Canada are in different phases of re-opening.** Many municipalities are anticipating maintaining the current approach to operations into the fall if not the end of the year. As provinces slowly open up and people regain their mobility, there is significant uncertainty of what the impacts may be to utility staffing.
 - Some municipalities, for example, indicated they are still in lockdown or in the very early phases of stage 1 re-opening. For these municipalities/utilities, **precautionary procedures adopted at the beginning of the lockdown are still being maintained** and they are hoping to learn from what others are doing
 - Other municipalities/utilities implemented early work modifications (e.g. physical distancing, safety equipment, staggered shifts, split shifts). These modifications were successful and as a consequence, these utilities never had to scale back. **In these municipalities/utilities, capital works and programs are proceeding as scheduled.**
 - Several municipalities/utilities who had scaled back their workforce and projects amidst the pandemic, identified **a return to a full or almost-full field staff with increased safety measures and precautions in place** including more sanitation stations, floor markings, staggered work days, combination of staff at home/plant etc.
- There was general consensus among municipalities/utilities that **office staff productivity at home remains high and these staff will continue to work from home for the foreseeable future**, some even indicating for the remainder of the year and beyond.
- **One widespread challenge for most municipalities/utilities was the ongoing challenge of PPE supplies and the consistent use of PPE by staff. Staff complacency is a concern.** Some continue to experience difficulty in maintaining or acquiring supplies such as hand sanitizer, disinfection wipes and proper masks, while others

- are still working to get staff in the habit of using PPE including knowing when and where to use it.
- As a solution to supply, some municipalities have purchased mask sterilizers such as Clean Flow – Health Care Mini 001. Others have continued to collaborate with other municipal departments to secure supplies.
 - As a solution to staff awareness, some municipalities/utilities have implemented daily surveys, signage, and frequent reminders regarding the when, what, how and why of PPE.
 - Another **overwhelming challenge expressed by municipalities/utilities was managing the logistics of physical distancing**. It was highlighted that the workplace employees will come back to will look very different than the one they left.
 - **Workplace considerations** such as getting people into buildings or to sites, enabling safe access to communal spaces such as washroom facilities, locker and lunch rooms, and navigating the yard have all proved challenging. Many of these communal spaces are often shared across departments. Staggering shift has helped to reduce the overlap of too many staff in the common areas.
 - **Staff considerations** are also top-of-mind for many municipalities/utilities. Some indicating challenges around complacency among staff, dimensions of workspaces, and how to navigate projects requiring field staff to work in close proximity.
 - **Participating municipalities/utilities highlighted actions that have been adopted in an effort to overcome these challenges**. These actions include, but are not limited to, having field/office staff complete daily surveys, daily reminders of physical distancing protocols, plastic divider screens in work trucks, cross-divisional collaboration in scheduling, job hazard assessments that adopt a structured process in looking at all the risks of returning to work, markings on floor, signage, bringing staff back at lower rates, staggered shifts, and keeping staff at home.
 - Some municipalities/utilities have indicated that they have **retractions plans in place should a second wave occur** along with trigger points and identified response action. It was expressed that going back into lockdown would not pose as much of a challenge the second time around.
 - Several participating municipalities/utilities indicated that **Microsoft Teams has been incredibly useful for communications** between frontline staff, and supervisors,

and for collaborating. Many utilities see that this platform will continue to be used in the foreseeable future.

Discussion Topic 2: Rapid Fire Roundtable – Priorities for Stimulus Funding to Ensure Utilities are Future-Ready

Stimulus funding for infrastructure projects may come as economies across the country begin to re-open. This may present an opportunity for achieving co-benefits for other key social, economic and environmental initiatives. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated a number of ongoing concerns such as equity and affordability and unemployment, while shining a light on other areas that further stress water, wastewater and stormwater services such as climate change. Below is a summary of the key considerations and prioritization activities that utilities are exploring in the event of stimulus funding:

- **Many municipalities/utilities are in the process of re-prioritizing projects** – many with co-benefits such as energy efficiency, green infrastructure, flood resiliency, and climate-ready objectives – as they begin to scale back up. This includes re-evaluating growth driven upgrades as development rates have slowed in some areas.
- **In municipalities that never scaled down, capital programs are proceeding unabated** Whereas some municipalities/utilities harder hit by the pandemic – predominately Eastern Canada – are relying on stimulus funding to push forward with planned capital works.
- There was general agreement that **engineering staff have been incredibly productive** during the pandemic. Therefore, many municipalities/utilities are investing in design projects to advance as many projects as they can. In some cases, the focus is on advancing shovel-ready projects.
- Municipalities/utilities that did not significantly scale down in their capital works and projects – predominately in Central and Western Canada – do not anticipate receiving stimulus funding and instead predict it will likely go to sectors in greater need (e.g. transportation, roads).
- One challenge has been with the need for out of province contractors to self-isolate for 14 days prior to commencing activities.
- In some municipalities/utilities, **capital works are being delayed to recoup losses incurred during the pandemic.**
- Many municipalities/utilities in Ontario mentioned reaching out to the provincial and federal governments for both funding and regulatory advice, specifically on the Environmental Assessment Act. Some capital projects that may have co-benefits are not yet through the Environmental Assessment process so therefore are not yet able to

proceed. This may in fact delay actions toward achieving benefits if they are tied up in process.

Looking Ahead: Opportunities to Consider and Emerging Challenge Areas

- Many of the **COVID-19 symptoms are the same as the common cold or flu**. As we move closer to the cold/flu season, there is concern among some municipalities/utilities for how this might impact staff losses.
- With the plan to keep many staff working from home for the foreseeable future, municipalities/utilities will have to **continue to monitor employee mental health and well-being**.
- As municipalities/utilities continue to move forward with capital projects to help stimulate the economy, there maybe an opportunity to streamline and modernize regulations (e.g. EA requirements) to more effectively advance projects and support economic development.

Canadian Water Network's 
Canadian Municipal Water Consortium

Attendees

Municipality/Utility	Name
Alberta Capital Region Wastewater Commission	Mike Darbyshire
Canadian Water and Wastewater Association	Robert Haller
City of Calgary	Francois Bouchart
City of Guelph	Matthew Phillips
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	Stephan Craik
Halifax Water	Wendy Krkosek
Niagara Region	Gerry Atkinson
Ontario Water Works Association	Michele Grenier
Region of Peel	Jeff Hennings
Region of Peel	Anthony Perente
Utilities Kingston	Allen K. Lucas
York Region	Jennifer Khemai
York Region	Beth Weir

Agenda

Agenda: COVID-19 Peer-sharing – Water Utility Management Response	
Friday June 12, 2020 1:00 – 2:00 pm EDT	
1:00 – 1:10 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
1:10 – 1:30 pm	<p>Topic 1: Rapid Fire Roundtable - Re-opening</p> <p>Scaling up was mentioned on an earlier call to be potentially more challenging than going into lockdown. Please share with the group your insights into the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> So far, what are the biggest challenges of re-opening for your municipality/utility and how is it being addressed? What is working well with re-opening services at your municipality/utility? Do you have a retraction plan if/when a second wave hits and what are the main elements of your retraction plan? <p>Roundtable will go through participants on the call from east to west. Please gather your thoughts to share with the group.</p>
1:30 – 1:50 pm	<p>Topic 2: Rapid Fire Roundtable - What opportunities are you considering for stimulus funding to ensure your utility is future-ready?</p> <p>Stimulus funding may come for infrastructure projects but how might we look at this as an opportunity for achieving co-benefits for other key social, economic and environmental initiatives such as equity and affordability, job creation, and climate change adaptation and mitigation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What shovel-ready or shovel-worthy projects do you have now and in the near future and are those plans acknowledging co-benefits? How has COVID-19 changed the intentions/desired outcomes of currently planned projects? What are you considering now that you weren't considering pre-pandemic? What potential co-benefits could be captured through infrastructure investments in your utility/municipality? <p>Roundtable will go through participants on the call from west to east. Please gather your thoughts to share with the group.</p> <p>POLL: What is your municipality/utility's current approach to its capital expenditure plan? Continue as planned; Scale back; Put on hold</p>
1:50 – 1:55 pm	COVID-19 Wastewater Coalition update
1:55 – 2:00 pm	<p>Wrap-up</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Next Meeting TBD