

Community Dispatch

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CANADA VOTES 2004 – CITIES AND SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

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ISSUE 2: CITIES AND SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Did you know that municipalities such as Burlington, Oakville, Milton and Halton Hills are not a constitutional level of government in Canada? All municipalities are created by the provincial government. This means that any powers local governments have, like taxation or regulation, is expressly granted to them by the province.

Municipalities in Canada are changing rapidly, and urban areas in particular are seeing significant population growth, a widening gap between the incomes of the richest and poorest citizens, and increasing ethno-cultural diversity.

The federal government has disengaged from national social programs, such as social housing, over the past decade. Provincial governments have also downloaded social programs to municipalities. This reduction in investment by senior levels of government has squeezed municipalities on both sides, with more responsibility for accommodating increasing diversity and no additional revenue sources to support the increased demand on their resources.

Municipalities' main source of revenue is property taxation. Local governments are requesting new sources of stable and predictable funding directly from the federal government in the form of a share of certain taxes, such as the gas tax.

Canadians want to live in cities that are safe and inclusive. In order to build inclusive cities we need adequate social infrastructure like:

- Programs to reduce poverty

- Affordable housing and programs to address homelessness
- Integrated approaches to addressing drug use including harm reduction, treatment, prevention and enforcement
- Programs to support immigrants and refugees
- Affordable public transportation
- Preventive approaches to community safety and security
- Accessibility for people with disabilities

Of course there are lots of questions that need to be asked before we start sending blank cheques to local governments. We need mechanisms that ensure municipalities are accountable for the money they receive. A strong social infrastructure not only complements but also strengthens the economic infrastructure of municipalities.

We need to think very carefully about the role of municipalities in 21st century Canada, and what new responsibilities and powers they may need in order to help build communities that are just and healthy for everyone.

Issues:

- Canada is urbanizing rapidly, with growing ethno-cultural diversity and widening income gaps between rich and poor.
- Municipalities across Canada are facing mounting responsibility for the provision of social infrastructure without a significant increase in revenue sources.
- We need to ensure that municipalities are accountable for funds they receive from senior levels of government, and that directing funding to the local government level does not result in increasing disparities across Canada

Questions for Candidates:

- Are you prepared to have municipalities at the table in national discussions about social issues and programs?

- What would you do to insure there is adequate social infrastructure in Ontario cities?
- Are you prepared to replace transfers with revenue sharing like the gas tax and beyond in order to support the social infrastructure of cities?

To find out more:

- Building Inclusive Communities: Cross-Canada Perspectives and Strategies:
www.laidlawfdn.org/programmes/children/clutter-buck-novick-paper.pdf
- Federation of Canadian Municipalities:
www.fcm.ca



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