

ROMA Conference Report January 31, 2018

This is only ROMA's second stand alone conference and judging by the many attendees, numerous sessions, and overall positive comments, I would say it was a success. Congratulations to the ROMA Board and organizers.

I will share some highlights from my conference experience:

Hinterland Heroes was an amazing "people" journey from Toronto, through the St. Lawrence Seaway, up through the Northwest Passage and down through to Victoria and Vancouver Island. The journey was about celebrating Canada, our vast wilderness, the true north of our Country and the proud and unique Canadians both on the journey and met along the way in their home communities. The takeaway from this inspiring opening session is that we are all different, we all play an important role where we live, and we can all inspire others. We can begin to understand the lives of others by putting ourselves in their space. The importance of having an open mind and welcoming new experiences cannot be emphasized enough. In the end, we are all Canadian, no one is less, no one is more, and in our vast country, we must remind ourselves of this from time to time when we might mistakenly view Canadians from another region as being odd or different or unable to understand our lives in our part of the world.

Also, be sure to add the song written and recorded on this journey, River of Nations (iTunes), it is beautiful!

Can We Finally Solve Ontario's Rural Broadband Deficit? This was a question I was hoping would be answered in this session and while there is light at the end of tunnel (or fibre!), it was enlightening really to see how many rural Ontario communities struggle to function with inadequate internet services. We are not quite in the same boat as communities such as Dubrierville or smaller southern rural communities just out of reach of urban areas with massive broadband capabilities. These small places experience frustration and disruption daily. It is more than not being able to scroll through ones Facebook page, it affects businesses and students in a negative way.

The Impact of Bill 68 On Municipal Investments was extremely interesting as One Investment was explained in detail and with great clarity. I think Council needs to become more educated in One Investment, how it works, why it works, and why it is an option to traditional bank account holdings. It is important for Council to understand this, so we can understand One Investment portfolio statements.

Amanda Lang is a seasoned and exceptional speaker. Her revolutionary concept is that we need to regain our curiosity and not be made to feel as if we are the troublemakers, nitpickers, or critics if we ask questions. I love this philosophy! Questions are necessary, especially as Councillors whose job it is to understand completely the issues we are tasked with making decisions about. Reading all material and asking questions when you need to know something will help to make an informed decision. Questioning and curiosity are often, through negative reinforcement, removed from our adult thinking and behaviour. Amanda says bring it back in your life! Ask the questions! Don't be afraid! And don't criticize or belittle those who do ask questions and are curious about how something or someone works.

This comes as no surprise that I would be inspired by and impressed with the session, Legalization of Recreational Marijuana; Challenge or Opportunity. The general opinion by a federally licensed grower is

that this is the time for municipalities and land owners to seek licensed operations who are scouting locations across Ontario and Canada. What do we have to offer? What makes us stand out in this new and burgeoning marketplace? That is what the Municipality, along with the EDC must decide and present to the licensed growers' community. The time is now. It is quite clearly now.

Social Media for Municipalities was an interesting session as it was clear there were many people who are either very new to social media or have not yet made the plunge. It used to be that it was something of a badge to be worn proudly if one did not engage in social media. That time has passed. Social media is how so many in our communities communicate, gather information, make decisions, support causes, decide their voting strategy; live their daily lives. Currently, Council does not have a social media presence and I think we are missing a vital link in providing information to our community. Many municipalities post regular updates to platforms such as twitter, Instagram, and Facebook regarding council decisions, municipal events, partnerships, and regular information, like the garbage schedule. I believe that monitored, consistent and useful information updates posted to social media platforms can only benefit the people of our community.

The Leadership Gap was meant to be a discussion solely about the aging Senior Municipal staff statistic (81% eligible to retire within five years) but turned to a general discussion about aging Councils, who along with senior staff, are looking to retire from municipal governance as well. It was obvious throughout the conference that few "young" Councillors, those 40 and under, are interested in, or able to sit on Council. I attended a session at AMO in Ottawa that touched on this issue and tasked current Councils with doing everything they could to make the seat more attractive, and doable, for young people with jobs, families, and other community interests. As for succession planning and senior municipal staff retirement solutions; it became clear that students working towards degrees in Public Administration, Business Administration, and other easily transferable skill teaching degrees, do not readily consider a career in Municipal government. They consider federal or provincial government, but local government is an unknown. It is not that they prefer to work elsewhere, it is that they are not aware of the opportunities available to them. AMO seems to be working on this and has developed a campaign, including a video, aimed at educating, and recruiting potential employees.

Another major highlight was the Ministers Forum preceded by a message from Bill Mauro, Minister of Municipal Affairs. Mr. Mauro highlighted several projects throughout Ontario, some as small as a guard railing on a short stretch of rural road to water treatment facilities. The trend of uploading has continued, as opposed to the relentless surge of downloading costs to Municipalities experienced under the Harris government more than 20 year ago. It has been a long time getting to this place of fair service costs for municipalities and reversing the financial destruction suffered over many years.

The Ministers Forum was fast paced and informative and it was obvious that the concerns of one or two communities in rural Ontario, are really our concerns too. School closings, invasive species, long term care; these are concerns relevant to all of us. It is admirable that the Ministers are willing to answer questions on the spot and make every effort to provide thoughtful, meaningful answers.

Sandra Weitzel

