



# Canada's Mayors Speak

## Challenges of local government in 2018



Heather Bastedo is the President of Public Square Research, a research shop that specializes in accessing and engaging stakeholders, and putting the people back in research. She can be reached at [hbastedo@publicsquareresearch.ca](mailto:hbastedo@publicsquareresearch.ca).



Kate Graham researches, writes, speaks, and teaches about politics in Canada's cities. One of her current projects examines the role and power of mayors in Canada, which can be found at [MayorsProject.ca](http://MayorsProject.ca). She can be reached at [kate@mayorsproject.ca](mailto:kate@mayorsproject.ca).

Only a small percentage of Canadians ever have the privilege and responsibility of being the mayor of their community. This select group of people have unique perspectives on their communities and on local government in Canada. Mayors play a central role within their communities, working closely with citizens, community organizations, councillors, provincial and federal politicians, administrators, and citizens – all under the ever-present scrutiny of the media. More than any other local official, mayors are expected to be at every significant event in the community, be well-informed on a wide range of local issues, and keep a finger on the pulse of their community. Indeed, if you could only speak to one person about the issues a community is facing, the mayor would be a good choice.

### New Insights from Canada's Mayors Speak Study

What do mayors see as being the most pressing issues facing Canadian communities? What are the challenges of being a mayor in 2018? What would mayors like to see changed about local government in Canada? And, most importantly, what can we learn about communities and local government in Canada from listening to our mayors?

A 2018 study, Canada's Mayors Speak, provides new insight into these questions. In early 2018, we surveyed approximately 400 Canadian mayors who serve communities with a population of 10,000 or more. The first survey was administered in January 2018. A follow-up survey was administered in May 2018. More than 110 mayors participated in the study, including mayors from all regions of Canada. Hoping to draw on the collective wisdom of Canada's mayors, we asked this group to share perspectives on their jobs, their communities, and their challenges.

Not surprisingly, these mayors had many insights to share: how they spend their time, how they keep tabs on what is happening in their community, and what relationships are most important to them. In addition, mayors shared their priorities with respect to key issues such as infrastructure, transit, and housing. Most importantly, they shared what they see as the challenges facing local governments today. (The full survey results are available online at [PublicSquareResearch.ca](http://PublicSquareResearch.ca) or [MayorsProject.ca](http://MayorsProject.ca).)

The survey data also highlighted and provided insight into some of the broader challenges facing local leaders and local governments in Canada today.

Here's a summary of what we learned when Canada's Mayors Speak about the

challenges facing local governments in 2018.

## 1. Canada's mayors are under pressure.

Canadian mayors have a tough gig. The public has high expectations and often turn to their mayor when they want to see something happen in their community. Yet, Canadian mayors have limited legal power. When council is not working well together, the mayor is blamed. When people are unhappy with their local government, the mayor is blamed. When big issues flare up in a community, the mayor is blamed – whether they can actually do anything to resolve the issue or not.

There is no question: it's a tough gig.

Mayors shared a bit about what the pressures of their job look like in practice. Mayors spend a lot of time in council and committee meetings – more than they would like. On average, council and committee meetings (including preparation) occupy two days per week. Although this was identified as the most important part of the mayor's job, it is also the most time-consuming part of the role. Only one percent of mayors wish they could spend more time on these meetings – when asked what they would like to spend *less* time on, council and committee meetings were near the top of the list.

After council and committee meetings, mayors spend most of their time attending community events, meeting with members of the public, attending external committee and board meetings, and meeting with staff.

How would mayors like to spend their time? Most mayors indicated that their relationship with the public was the most important relationship to them, and nearly half (45 percent) of mayors identified that they would like to spend more time meeting with members of the community. Only one in 10 (11 percent) indicated a desire to spend more time meeting with their council colleagues, and a rare few (six percent) would like to spend more time with their chief administrative officer.

Maintaining all of these relationships is its own kind of pressure. When asked about the greatest challenges of their role, the two most frequent responses were “keeping everyone happy”

and “balancing conflicting interests.” Maintaining a work-life balance and meeting high expectations were also at the top of the list.

What are the implications for local government in Canada if mayors are feeling under pressure? Mayors are often the only elected official in their community elected to represent the entire community. What does it mean if mayors feel they do not have the capacity to maintain these relationships to the extent they would like? More foundationally, if mayors are facing high expectations and feel their capacity to meet those expectations is limited, how could that affect public confidence in local government in the long run? The pressures facing mayors not only create challenges for the individuals in the job, but also for local governments in Canada.

## 2. Issues facing local governments are not so “local” anymore.

In 2018, some of the biggest challenges facing local governments aren't what we usually think of as local issues. Local governments are being called on more and more often to respond to issues of mental health and addictions; increasingly rapid global economic change; and negative impacts of climate change, like rising sea levels and severe drought, forest fires, and flooding. And, while mayors may be wearing the same chain of office worn by their predecessors decades ago, they aren't dealing with the same kind of problems.

When asked about the most important issues facing their communities, the economy rises to the top of the list. More than six in 10 mayors (61 percent) identified economic development as the biggest issue, with their top priorities being attracting jobs and developing partnerships to spark innovation. When asked about what economic priorities are most urgent, the top response was fostering entrepreneurship.

After economic development, the biggest issues facing communities were identified as a lack of support from other governments, decaying infrastructure, housing, transit, and mental health and addictions.

Importantly, these are all issues where federal and provincial governments also have a role to play. International relations, such as the renegotiation of the

North American Free Trade Agreement, can also have a major impact on local economic conditions. Canada's mayors identify that their top issues are ones that also feature prominently on federal and provincial agendas – and mayors want to see improved collaboration between governments to address these issues.

## 3. Above all, mayors want more autonomy.

In an era where the challenges facing communities span across the traditional boundaries of government jurisdiction, the ability for governments to work together is paramount. Mayors had much to say on the topic of provincial-municipal relations; and, unfortunately, they present a concerning picture.

Almost all mayors (90 percent) indicated that their municipality is at least somewhat financially reliant on their respective provincial government – and yet, the majority (75 percent) feel they have very little or no influence when their province is making decisions that affect their community.

When asked what one thing they would change about local government in Canada, greater fiscal and political autonomy for municipalities rises to the top of the list. Almost half (43 percent) of mayors indicated a desire for greater revenue and financial flexibility, while another third (36 percent) desire more decision-making autonomy. Mayors would like to see stable funding, greater financial support to address large infrastructure needs, and more autonomy in policy making.

When asked what kind of support or training the mayors themselves felt they needed most, negotiation skills for dealing with provincial governments was a top response.

Mayors and local leaders are closely attuned to the needs of their communities. What are the implications if they are not able to influence other orders of government making decisions that affect their communities? As communities face increasingly complex pressures, what happens if municipalities remain unequipped with the decision-making power and revenue-generation tools to address these issues?

Canada's Constitution establishes municipalities as creatures of their

respective provinces, but much has changed in the landscape of Canadian local government since then. This survey comes at a time when the provincial-municipal relationship is being redefined in many Canadian provinces. Canada's mayors clearly desire more fiscal and policy autonomy in order to address the challenges faced by their communities – but, is there an appetite from federal and provincial governments to empower municipalities and local leaders? Are we ready to reconsider the role of local

leaders within Canadian federalism? Only time will tell.

### Conclusion

This article began by stating that only a small percentage of Canadians ever have the privilege of being a mayor. These individuals serve in a challenging role, where expectations are high and pressure abounds. Mayors must work with a wide array of individuals and groups in order to make things happen in their communities, and the issues they face are increasingly complex. Mayors are acutely

aware of how reliant municipalities are on their provincial governments, and aspire for greater empowerment from provincial governments in order to address the issues faced by their communities.

Mayors have important insights on Canadian local government and on the challenges facing Canada's communities. There is much work to do to equip municipalities and local leaders with the tools they need to address today's challenges – and listening when mayors and local leaders speak is an excellent place to start. **MW**

*as published in*

**MUNICIPAL WORLD**

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE – SINCE 1891

1-888-368-6125

[www.municipalworld.com](http://www.municipalworld.com)