

Northwest Territories Association of Communities

2021 FEDERAL ELECTION PLATFORM

The Northwest Territories Association of Communities (NWTAC) has prepared this Federal Election Platform in order to make prospective candidates aware of the issues that are important to NWT Communities.

The submission has been prepared by the NWTAC on the basis of the adopted resolutions of the organization, analysis of municipal governance issues and priorities for improvement of NWT economic and social conditions, and the priorities shared with partner organizations including the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

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The NWTAC office is open from 9 AM to Noon and 1 PM to 5 PM Monday to Friday.

The NWTAC

The NWTAC is the non-profit, non-governmental organization representing the interests of all 33 NWT communities. The NWTAC presents a unified voice for communities on municipal goals and issues, based upon the membership's democratic adoption of resolutions and policy. We promote these priorities through advocacy to the territorial and federal governments and through our membership in the national Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

1. Infrastructure Funding

Being a jurisdiction, where the lack of infrastructure is readily acknowledged, it has been very heartening to see additional funding being allocated to municipal infrastructure in the last few Federal budgets. The doubling of the Gas Tax Fund, although short term, (GTF) was particularly welcome. We would strongly encourage this to continue and become permanent and be enhanced.

The unique conditions of Northern and remote communities greatly affect how municipal infrastructure is built and maintained.

Northern communities face:

- extreme isolation and shipping challenges;
- a shorter and highly variable construction season;
- limited human resource availability and capacity;
- limited access to funding;
- growing demands on aging and existing infrastructure;
- early stages of corporate development;
- unique project needs.

The Gas Tax Fund or newly renamed Canadian Community Building Fund (CCBF) works very well in the territorial North, because of its flexibility and predictability and because it does not require cost-sharing and is base plus. Further its flexibility and allocation basis means that projects that are chosen are based on the priorities of the community – this is in keeping with the focus on Asset Management as being encouraged by all levels of government.

Building communities in the North is important for local social and economic sustainability. A recent study completed for us by the Conference Board of Canada Centre for the North showed that for every million dollars invested at a community level, 13 jobs are created as compared to roughly half that for Federal and Territorial direct spending.

COVID-19 stimulus should include funding for capital that is a priority for individual communities and should be provided in an allocation method like the Canadian Community Building Fund.

Recommendations:

- That the government make the doubling of the Canadian Community Building Fund permanent.
- The Canadian Community Building Fund works very well in the NWT, because it is allocation based, flexible, predictable and does not require cost-sharing. All future infrastructure programs should be designed in the same way.

2. Climate Change

Federal focus on the climate change challenge to date has been on **Flooding & Wildfires** as that is the primary imminent risks in the south. These are just two of the many climate Change Challenges being faced in the North.

In the NWT, Climate Change isn't a distant, abstract problem – it's here now and NWT communities are at the forefront of the climate change challenge.

The rapid warming, at 2 to 4 times the rate as the rest of Canada, is causing significant changes in the natural environment including ice, permafrost, water, vegetation and wildlife. The frequency and severity of extreme weather events is also increasing. These changes are causing problems for human health, public safety, food security, infrastructure and economic and cultural activities.

Some of the challenges include:

- Permafrost Thaw
- Flooding and Extreme Weather
- Coastal and River Erosion
- Wildfires
- Unsafe Access to the Land
- Human Health and Well Being
- Transportation (ice roads, sea-lift, airports)
- Water and Waste
- Agriculture and Food Security
- Economic Development

Extreme weather conditions shorten the life of many assets in the North, and climate change, which is occurring twice as rapidly than in the south, exacerbates this effect.

In this time of climate change, many additional expenditures will be required as well in order to ensure the sustainability of the communities and the Territorial economy. The NWTAC has completed a study showing the fiscal impact of permafrost decay alone on public infrastructure will be in the order of \$1.3 billion.

The scale of the Climate Change Challenge in the NWT far exceeds the capacity of the Territorial or local governments to address and will require a considerable fiscal investment by the federal government first to finish articulating the scope and scale of the challenge as well as actually mitigating and addressing those impacts.

As well, programs that facilitate the development of Territorial projects which will encourage trade including highway development such as the Mackenzie Valley Highway will have significant impacts on Economic Development as well as increasing the resilience of the communities to climate change that are on the route. There needs to be an exploration of the Territorial Government's contribution amounts as the GNWT debt limit is setting the pace at which some of this work can occur.

Given the role this region plays in national sovereignty and supporting resource development, these investments should be seen as critical to nation building.

Recommendations:

- That the government ensure that adequate funding is being provided to Territorial Governments, Indigenous Governments and Local Governments to ensure that they are well equipped to meet the Climate Change challenge
- The design of any programs to support climate change in the North must be done in consultation with Northerners to ensure that they have uptake and are effective.

3. Increasing the Supply of Housing

In the majority of NWT communities, heavy reliance upon public housing is required as a result of high unemployment and the lack of a private housing market. The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) spends roughly 25 times more per capita on housing than does a typical Canadian province. Relative to the rest of Canada, more NWT residents live in more crowded conditions and in housing more in need of major repair.

The percentage of households in core need (households with a housing problem and income below the core need income threshold) stands at 12% in communities considered to have a private housing market, and 42% in non-market communities. Although rental vacancy rates are rising in Yellowknife (the only community where data is available), there is no territory-wide estimate of the volume of the shortfall in housing units. The NWT Housing Corporation routinely reports waiting lists for housing units in excess of 400 applicants.

In its national campaign, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities has identified lack of affordable housing as “the most urgent financial issue facing Canadians today”. The NWT Association of Communities adopted a resolution calling lack of housing “a violation of human dignity and of human rights... representing the most extreme form of poverty and deprivation” and called on the government “direct and fund its departments to end homelessness in the Northwest Territories.”

Progress on overcoming the deficit in affordable, adequate and available housing in the NWT cannot be achieved without a renewed federal commitment to funding the construction and renewal of social and affordable housing, through a national housing strategy. Although some progress has been made on this front, increased investments are still required.

The private marketplace has not been and will not be efficient in delivering assets considered critical to social and economic development in the region due to size of both the Territory and the communities within it. COVID-19 has further highlighted the urgency of this issue in the NWT. Many of the programs that were instituted in the last while have proven challenging to access and maintain in the small and remote communities of the NWT especially.

Recommendations:

- The dire state of housing inadequacy requires extraordinary allocation of federal funds to overcome the deficit in the housing supply. A long-term federal funding commitment for housing is critical to address the unmet housing needs of NWT residents.
- Affordable housing agreements must be flexible and respect provincial and territorial jurisdictions, chronic homelessness and inadequacy of housing must be eliminated through proven strategies; tax incentives or other measures must be used to stimulate new rental and affordable housing construction; and, special, territorial funding transfers are required to preserve and renovate existing social housing units.

4. Telecommunications

Given the remote nature and size of NWT communities, telecommunications is extremely critical. There is no ability to drive to many resources whether it is a store, bank, health care provider, educator, police etc. so all forms of telecommunications are extremely important to NWT communities participating in the digital economy.

Access to broadband internet has become essential to living in the modern world and the lack of access or bandwidth limitations in the North has long been identified as an impediment to the growth of our communities and the NWT as a whole.

Levels of service that are taken for granted in the south are unheard of in much of the NWT. Something as simple as a logo in an email can bring your email to a grinding halt. Attempting to file a document required for a funding grant to your community can prove nigh on impossible.

The NWT is experiencing a general out migration and some of this may be attributed to the inability to function in today's digital world. It is certainly listed as a liability for businesses attempting to operate in the NWT and the same can be said for municipal corporations. It is also an impediment for recruiting employees with young families.

In today's knowledge based global economy these service gaps are a significant impediment to participating effectively.

Another area of concern for northern communities is a lack of redundancy which leaves communities vulnerable to service outages and technical failures. Service failures in the summer of 2019 alone were estimated to have a cost of \$10 million on the local economies.

Having all telecommunication systems off-line for days at a time is unacceptable today and yet it is a fairly common occurrence in the North.

While considerable improvements have been made to ensure cell service to all NWT communities, there is still considerable vulnerability to the driving public as there is no cell service between communities – distances of 100's of kilometers.

While some progress has been made in previous federal budgets, more needs to be done. COVID-19 really highlighted the inadequacy of current networks and the vulnerability of our northern and remote communities.

Recommendations:

- It is important to ensure the NWT and the North have adequate telecommunications and broadband (in terms of speed, bandwidth and availability) to ensure Northerners can effectively participate in not only the digital economy but all aspects of digital life.
- The reality in the North is that we cannot wait for market forces to drive our progress and that funding must be secured for this to happen. Basic service objectives must include high-speed internet access and service reliability and funding must be to these levels of service which one would argue have become the new “basic”.
- More work needs to be done to ensure cellular coverage is put in place along all NWT Highways to ensure the safety of the driving public. This should include all newly constructed highways.

5. Reconciliation & Social Determinants of Health

So much of the ability of the NWT to move forward is tied to Reconciliation and the social determinants of health

including the aforementioned housing and homelessness and other areas like employment, education, early childhood development, food security, and mental health and addictions.

Recommendations:

- Implement the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework to create a future where Northern and Arctic people are thriving, strong and safe.
- Implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls’ Calls for Justice in partnership with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples.
- Provide more accessible and affordable childcare. Negotiate agreements with the Government of the Northwest Territories to provide subsidized childcare throughout the NWT.
- Adequately fund the provision of Mental Health and Addictions treatment to allow the Territories to move beyond the harm reduction model that is not even being achieved.



**For more information of the NWTAC platform for the
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