

Questions and Responses for Election 2023

MLA candidates – Caroline Wawzonek

Questions were sent on behalf of the NWT Association of Communities to all Member of Legislative Assembly Candidates about issues important to communities in the Northwest Territories. We will follow up with the elected members throughout the term of the 20th Assembly.

1. NWT communities have faced a persistent funding shortfall, which became more apparent with the 2023 review. Despite commitments by the Legislative Assembly, this underfunding issue has persisted for years. Will you commit to the funding to address this persistent funding gap of nearly \$40 million/year for community governments in the NWT and provide them with the permanent resources they require?

Response: As of June 2023, it is my understanding that an advisory council comprised of representatives from the Northwest Territories Association of Communities and the Local Government Administrators of the NWT were working with the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs on a comprehensive review of all community funding policies. If that has in fact been completed, then I would like to review it and ask questions on it before making policy commitments in this space.

Historically, some communities were overfunded while others were underfunded and Federal infrastructure funds (formerly the gas tax) were not being fully expended by several communities. I hope that the 2023-24 review will help provide clarity on the full range of funds available, identify any that are chronically underfunded as well as find ways to utilize any that are not. With this understanding and, hopefully recommendations flowing from that review, the GNWT can be in a place to make better policy for the funding of municipalities.

2. What steps will you take to ensure that these communities can continue to afford to deliver these services?

Response: In addition to wanting to see the implementation of outcomes from the community funding policy review discussed under question one, I have expressly noted three things in my platform that can support municipal capacity:

1. Complete the transfer of land ownership from GNWT to municipalities to create better opportunities for investment and development. This can be an important review stream for tax based communities;
2. Modernize the *Cities, Towns and Villages Act* to provide appropriate administration of communities of different sizes; and
3. Advocate for more flexible Federal funding to municipalities including resolving access to millions of unspent infrastructure dollars within the Federal Community Infrastructure Fund.

3. The 37% budget shortfall makes climate change in the NWT even more difficult for communities to address. How will you help communities in the NWT become more resilient in the face of climate change, and what funding priorities will you establish to address these challenges, including disaster mitigation?

Response: We should ensure future infrastructure projects incorporate climate mitigation and adaptation in their designs so that our future infrastructure is energy efficient at the least and carbon neutral at best as well as resilient in the face of more climate extremes.

It is my understanding that communities should already have Community Wildfire Protection Plans dating back to 2014. Obviously 'best practices' may have evolved but to get started immediately and before next year's wildfire season, I would prefer to avoid excessive further reviews and start by asking the narrower question of what has not been done that is outstanding and still relevant.

We should consider at what level of emergency there should be a "Territorial Incident Command Centre" where all municipal, regional and Territorial emergency management personnel be combined into a single physical space to ensure seamless communication between levels as well as towards the public and avoid duplication of roles or responsibilities.

4. Are you committed to investing in municipal infrastructure and initiatives to address and prevent the effects of climate change and making it a top priority for the territorial government, particularly considering catastrophic wildfires that threaten entire communities? How will you ensure communities battling inadequate funding and legislative restrictions have the necessary resources?

Response: I cannot envision how the persistent infrastructure deficit across all of the NWT would not continue to be part of the GNWT's priorities.

As noted above, I have expressly included the following two points in my platform:

1. Modernize the *Cities, Towns and Villages Act* to provide appropriate administration of communities of different sizes; and
2. Advocate for more flexible Federal funding to municipalities including resolving access to millions of unspent infrastructure dollars within the Federal Community Infrastructure Fund.

I would also like to see stronger authority with the Red Tape Reduction Working Group to direct changes when internal government policies, regulations or processes create unnecessary barriers or restrictions not only for business but municipalities as well.

5. The education system in the NWT has faced criticism for failing to provide students with fundamental abilities. The purpose of the recently passed Bill 81 is to recognize the duties of Indigenous peoples and governments, clarify responsibilities, and increase parental involvement in education. Considering these amendments, do the modifications adequately address the deficiencies in the NWT education system, or is an Auditor General Review of the education system still required?

Response: Given that the amendment process for the *Education Act* has only undergone phase 1, that work to introduce phase 2 is underway and expected in the next assembly, and that curriculum renewal has only been introduced this school year, it is too early to assess the success of these changes let alone the additional impacts that will occur from the remaining *Education Act* amendments that may be proposed in phase 2.

Once the second phase of amendments have been made and curriculum renewal fully rolled out, then we should ensure that fulsome program evaluation takes place. However, we should be mindful that seeing the full outcome of changes to the education system may take years of children moving through the full system.

6. How do you intend to ensure educational facilities in the NWT implement the new legislative changes proposed in Bill 81 to enhance education, emphasizing addressing deficiencies and ensuring students graduate with the required skills?

Response: The most recent amendments to the *Education Act* included the following areas that will need to be implemented and then monitored and/or evaluated to determine their effectiveness towards addressing deficiencies and ensuring student success:

- update the procedural requirements to be followed when modifying a school program for a student;
- allow the Minister to access student records for the purposes of evaluating a school program or monitoring student progression through the education system;
- permit school staff to disclose information in a student record to an education body or the Department;
- consolidate and clarify the areas in which the Minister may issue directions under the Act; and
- provide the Minister with the authority to establish oversight committees.

It is not the role of an individual MLA to direct education bodies about their operational work however MLAs must be prepared to press the Minister and Department of ECE with inquiries and questions that hold them ultimately accountable for the implementation and delivery of outcomes following these changes.

7. The issues of homelessness, mental health, and addiction are complex and interconnected. How do you propose to resolve the homelessness crisis in Northern communities and improve access to affordable housing?

Response: The comprehensive strategy released only earlier this year to address homelessness, “A Way Home,” must be fully implemented. This strategy includes a strong focus on Integrated Service Delivery (ISD) to support the spectrum of needs that can increase a person’s risk of being homeless as well as the obvious need to increase overall housing stock and better coordinate the efforts and funding available not only to the GNWT but Indigenous Governments and Municipalities. The placement of this strategy along with key programs like ISD under the Premier’s office will help ensure that the whole of government approach contemplated within can be effectively delivered with an appropriate level of cross departmental accountability.

8. How will you ensure that mental health and addiction services are accessible and adequately funded to enhance the well-being of all Northwest Territories residents?

Response: The health and sustainability of our healthcare system must be a priority over the next four years, and beyond.

According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, Nunavut and the NWT are a close one and two for the highest per capita spending on health care in Canada; and well more than double any of the provinces. In 2022-23, the Department of Health and Social Services’ base budget already made up almost one third of the entire GNWT operating budget. Then through the year the GNWT added almost \$50 million more through supplementary appropriations. Despite that, the health authority continues to operate on a deficit and staff morale remains damagingly low. What we are doing is not working resolving it is urgent. Work on health system financial sustainability needs to take a creative and meaningful look at our health care priorities to ensure that core services and preventive functions are delivering effective results.

Our health care system relies on the strength and wellness of those delivering care. To support healthier workplaces for healthcare professionals, we should ensure a response to the recommendations received from internal workplace assessments done within the health care system as well as the Employee Engagement and Satisfaction Survey that lay out specific recommendations for improving the health and safety of healthcare workplaces. There needs to be a workplan to achieve these recommendations with a timeline and clear point of accountability to report on them.

Addictions and mental health requires more than a response exclusive or limited to within traditional health care. We need whole of government approaches that look at all social-health indicators such as housing, family wellness, early childhood and education. This kind of approach is reflected in both the “A Way Home,” the comprehensive strategy to end Homelessness, as well as “Changing the Relationship,” An Action Plan to respond to the Calls to Justice by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ peoples.