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# Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

## DEBATES and PROCEEDINGS

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### **Bill No. 73 *The Municipalities Amendment Act***

**Mr. Forbes:** Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise tonight and enter into the second reading debates on Bill No. 73, The Municipalities Amendment Act, 2012, and it is quite a substantial piece before us and it has lots of substantial work in here. And of course, you know, this kind of thing often lends itself to times when you have question and answer and we will get to that at some point.

But I do want to take a minute and I know there will be others who want to have some time to talk about the bill itself because it is a fairly substantial piece.

And we do think about, you know, when we're dealing with the different levels of government and we often think that many of our citizens, and probably rightfully so, when they look at services and they look at how we do business, to them we're government. And whether we're provincial, federal or municipal, we're all the same. And so in many ways, because of the way our system is set up through the constitution and how rights and responsibilities are devolved out of the constitution and it's a way that we've come to appreciate how Canada is run, right from our villages and hamlets right up to our cities, our provinces, our regions, this all plays out.

When I speak about our regions too, Mr. Speaker, it's not by a slip of the tongue. I mean actually some of the things that the minister has referred to in his remarks talks about the New West Trade Agreement and that type of thing. And of course that brings to mind to me CETA [Canada-European Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement], the European trade agreement and how . . . And now none of this is related to that, but I know that there are a lot of concerns about some of our trade agreements and the impact it has on our ability to be in charge of our own affairs.

And you know, we often have a lot of concerns about trying to make sure that our communities are vibrant, our economies are strong, and that if we can create work and jobs in our own cities and towns and provinces that's a good thing. Sometimes though

when we sign these trade agreements, we create situations that we had not fully foreseen, and that becomes a bit of a problem. And so it is important that we take some time to read these bills, think about them a bit, discuss them, talk to our stakeholders. And if there was, it would be, you know, a great day if there was some way that we could get our constituent input into some of these issues. But it is difficult because they do seem remote when we talk about some of these specific things. And they become very interested when it's something that's directly related to them.

And I'm thinking of particularly the first time the minister talks about boundary exemptions and how do you transfer from one type of . . . to an RM [rural municipality] to a city annexation. Those can be very difficult. When you talk about it in theory, it's a little bit more abstract and a little easier, but not very interesting. And then when it happens to be your farm, it probably is a very big deal, and so it's just that much more real.

So these are the challenges we have as politicians, and it's our responsibility to make sure it's fair and it's doable as it possibly can be and it's practical. And so we rely on those stakeholders like SUMA [Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association] and SARM [Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities] to give us their best advice, but appreciating too that they have strong, strong stakes in these decisions as well. And so we have to take the time to make sure we get it right.

And so as I review the minister's comments, I'll just take a moment to talk about them because I think it gives us a good insight into the bill itself. But as I said, you know, with so many of those things — and we seem to see a few of these bills and probably that's not a bad thing — but we see a quite a few that have a lot of detail and will need a lot of scrutiny when it comes to committee. But we're not there yet and we're still at the big picture place.

So, first he talks about . . . He has several main ideas that he wanted to pursue but the first is that they will, this amendment “will improve processes related to the boundary alterations or annexations for the municipalities involved for the Saskatchewan Municipal Board and to support government's growth strategy.” So that's an interesting thing. And how do we do that in a way that's fair, that's responsible, and not push around some of the smaller players?

Some of these RMs may feel that they want to . . . it's their leverage that's being taken away here. I'm not sure; it will be interesting to see what their thoughts are on that. And then apparently the SARM and SUMA had some specific requests. And then we talked about the New West Partnership Agreement and the agreement on internal trade when it comes to business licences and municipal procurement. And that's very important. And then there is some administrative matters making sure language is clear.

But first let's talk about the boundary limitations. And he talks about how there is “a new time limit on how long a municipality must wait for response to a proposed annexation application from the other affected municipality before the process is considered disputed and can then proceed to the Saskatchewan Municipal Board . . .” And of course then they

would require mediation. So this is important that there is a timely process and that there is some way that there is a process that people know that as this province is growing and as our cities and our communities grow, that there is a proper way and a fair way that's outlined. And so this is very clear that there will be a process for approval of a portion or parts of the board that can be agreed to.

So we're interested in that, talking more about that. If there are some specific areas in the province that are hot spots, of course we would probably assume that that would be around the larger cities, well in fact all cities. I think all the cities. You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think when we talk about the number of cities we have — I believe it's 12 or is it getting to be 14 now? — but of course those smaller ones are growing at quite a pace too. So that's very important.

The other one that is talking about some of the requests, and one of them was to be able to do . . . when they're creating taxation policies for within their own RM, it sounds like there's challenges when parts of their RMs are very heavily populated with acreages, that type of thing, and needs a different tax tool than some of the others than required because they're expecting services that are more urban-type. And so this is a challenge.

And so the RMs have expressed an interest that they can talk about additional service areas, and I think that sounds fair enough. I do want to make a note that of course there's important safeguards within the legislation. For example, additional service areas cannot be established to specifically target an individual, residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural property or be specific to a business or a business activity. So I think that speaks to the fairness. And it's a good thing that that might have been one of what we call unintended consequences, when we hadn't fully thought that out or if an RM decided to just go a little bit too far and decided that one type of business was worthy of a special tax for a service area.

But that's interesting, you know, because I know some RMs can be home to one specific type of industry or business. I mean, I'm thinking of a potash mine or, you know, different types of oil, that kind of thing. And so I'm not sure how that plays out into it.

They talk about municipal debt limits. And that's important that that can be dealt with and how we can utilize the municipal board in making sure that issues around debt and borrowing are done and borrowing approval are handled in an appropriate fashion.

So another area of amendments includes enabling municipalities to establish and enter into voluntary municipal business licensing arrangements and common issues of overweight vehicle permits with other municipalities. And this seems to make a lot of sense. I mean, I think this deals with a lot of our concerns. And I know, particularly if you have and were about to go into spring season, overweight trucks on the RM roads is a big, big issue. And so if we can establish some consistency across the borders, that would be a very, very good thing.

Now of course they do mention the amendment supports the province's commitments under interprovincial, national, and international agreements, such as the US partnership

and the Agreement on Internal Trade. And of course that's one of the things that I was asking about; I wonder if that could be the implications around CETA. That's very, very important.

And then they do talk about "The last main area of amendments addresses other requests of stakeholders to clarify certain administrative matters such as signing of council meeting minutes, consistent terminology regarding service or filing of assessment appeal notices . . ." Now I wonder if they have problems with the number of times they define employee or worker, like in a certain other bill that I know. We may be back defining, getting that straight, but that's for another time.

But these are . . . You know, and it does actually remind me a lot of *The Cities Act* because when that was introduced, that was a huge, huge piece of legislation. And we've seen *The Cities Act* come back before this House almost on an annual basis, almost annually because there is concerns. And so that's why we have concerns about other omnibus bills, just because they seem to be here every year and they don't really fix the problem that they thought they would and . . . if you don't get it right.

So Mr. Speaker, I think that this does make a lot of sense, and I think that those folks who serve as RM councillors and reeves and our city mayors and our city councillors all are deserving of a lot of respect. And even if people are in a rush, we do need to take the time, we need to take the time to acknowledge the good work that people do for us. They really are well-deserving of that special recognition, and I think this is, this is important that we do. And so when they bring forward suggestions for how we can improve our municipalities Act, our cities Act, anything to do with levels of government, let's take the time and hear them out.

Now it is, though, our responsibility that we make sure that it's in the basis of fairness and that there is nothing that can create an unfair or a disadvantage or singling out or targeting groups. I know that sometimes we often hear of those concerns. And there are people who come to our offices are concerned that how the game has changed and they're changing the rules as we go forward, and in the RMs where there can be issues around just the number of people involved. Everybody does know everybody. We want to make sure that our laws are fair and transparent and as accountable as possible.

So I think that the three things that the minister really wants to establish here about boundary descriptions, I'll be interested to hear how that . . . The questions that we ask in committee, particularly around any specifics, that will be of interest. The service areas that SUMA and SARM brought up, that's very important. And just talking about these different levels of agreements, and whether it's New West and whether it's the internal agreement on trade, or I'd be very curious to know if there's implications for CETA. I think that's very important. And of course when we talk about debt limits and that type of thing, clearly in this time that we are seeing incredible growth in infrastructure, that it's important that we have these conversations about debt. And we think that this is really worthwhile.

So a lot of this stuff is coming forward. And we know there's going to be a lot of

conversations about this, and we're hearing concerns. But we're also hearing that people want to move forward with it. But I know that there will be many folks on our side who will continue to raise these issues. You know, we've had a good break over the Easter week and been home and been able to see and talk to people about the concerns that they are raising. And I think it's important that we do support our municipalities in as many ways as we can. As I said, they're trying to do the very best job that they possibly can with the resources that they have, but sometimes all the tools aren't there. And when they make these kind of suggestions, we should listen to them.

So with that, Mr. Speaker, I know there's many other speeches and many other items we need to cover tonight, so I move adjournment on Bill No. 73, *The Municipalities Amendment Act, 2012*. Thank you very much.