

March 23, 2020

Hon. Premier John Horgan
West Annex Parliament Buildings
501 Belleville St.
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

Hon. Minister Selina Robinson
Room 310 Parliament Buildings
501 Belleville St.
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

RE: Local Government Collaboration and Support with Provincial Government

Dear Premier Horgan and Minister Robinson:

As Metro Vancouver Mayors' we would like to start by thanking the provincial government for their demonstrated leadership in moving quickly to respond to the current COVID-19 pandemic in protecting the health of our citizens and the whole of British Columbia.

As Local Mayors the health of our residents is a top priority and we are committed to working collaboratively within our individual municipalities, and with one another to enforce the directives by Dr. Bonnie Henry under the Public Health Emergency and by Minister Farnworth under the Provincial State of Emergency. Over the last several weeks our communities have been putting business continuity plans in place, standing up our Emergency Management Organizations (EMOs) and coordinating multiple sectors.

We know things will be ever evolving and our way of business and life in our communities has changed and will continue. We are committed to working with senior levels of government with other top priorities that are emerging due to COVID-19, one being the economic impact that will be very real for many people, including local government.

Over the past week through both the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) and the local Inter-governmental Finance Working Group, staff and elected officials, have been discussing the projected financial shortfalls local governments will experience directly related to the municipal response to COVID-19.

This discussion included the impact this pandemic is having and will continue to have on our residents and businesses. To successfully navigate the impacts for local government, residents and businesses, provincial and federal support targeted specifically for municipal issues is required.

To date, the federal government has announced key financial supports to citizens, workers and businesses and we would like to see a similar response from the provincial government. In particular, we urge the Province to:

1. Expand the Provincial Property Tax Deferment Program (PPTDP) to include all property owners, including residential, business and non-profits
2. Standardize and extend the due date for other tax authority levies
3. Provide support to all renters and landlords, and
4. Provide direct, unconditional grants to cover revenue losses

We know the province is working on these issues but we need to move as quickly as possible to address the extreme financial pressures citizens and businesses in our communities are facing and will continue to have. Solid supports are needed to reduce the anxiety and stress and ensure we have a strong foundation for a full recovery once this crisis has passed.

Each of the requests are discussed in detail below:

1. Expand the Provincial Property Tax Deferment Program (PPTDP) to include all property owners, including residential, business and non-profits

Many of us have already started to hear from residents, small business owners and non-profit organizations that are unable to pay their rent or tax payments.

They need measures now to survive this crisis. Expanding the existing PPTDP to cover all residents, businesses and non-profits would provide some piece of mind and could save many businesses from closing permanently. This action is needed without delay. Some of these businesses and non-profits provide important services that must remain available during this crisis.

This makes sound economic sense because these fully secured loans pose minimal risk to the Province, and can be extended over a period of time to ease the liquidity crunch, help stimulate consumption, will rebuild local economies, provide a social safety net, and avoid municipal property tax system disruptions.

For business properties it is important that the Province implement measures to ensure that the benefits provided by this program are passed on to tenants.

2. Standardize and extend the due date for other tax authority levies

Local governments collect taxes according to set dates on behalf of other taxing authorities such as the Province, TransLink, Metro Vancouver and other regional bodies.

Under current rules and legislation, if a local government was to delay municipal tax and OTA levies collection it would still be responsible for the payment of millions of dollars in OTA levies, which most local government are unable to absorb. Provincial action to extend these dates would enable local governments to extend payment due dates to all property owners.

3. Provide support to all renters and landlords

Many individuals will lose income and be unable to work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Evictions should be prohibited. Rather, to ease the burden of paying rent, the Province should augment Federal Government support to those in financial difficulty to help pay rent, particularly in Metro Vancouver where rental fees are high. Ensuring rent payments ensures that small landlords with mortgage helpers are able to maintain their homes.

4. Provide direct, unconditional grants to cover revenue losses

The coordination of local emergency responses, the closure of civic facilities and the cancellation of events and programs have had an immediate impact on municipal revenues. By law, local governments cannot run a deficit or borrow to balance operating budgets. At the same time, the majority of local government operating budgets are funded from property tax and utility fees.

Direct financial support to cities in the form of unconditional grants will help ensure cities can continue to offer the essential services residents and businesses need for their health, safety and well-being during this trying time.

Cities have quickly instituted the orders and direction of public health authorities necessary to keep residents safe and contain the spread of coronavirus. With support from the province, local governments are prepared to immediately extend payment deadlines for property taxes and OTA levies for residents and businesses.

Finally, as a regional body of Mayors we would like to suggest that together we establish a system of communication moving forward. As noted, information, orders and changes are occurring at rapid speed. We are receiving much of this information through the daily press conferences held by Dr. Henry.

It would be most helpful to have this information in practical terms then forwarded onto our EMO, with the specific tactics that local government must implement, and under whose authority they fall. We are currently looking at setting up weekly conference calls amongst the Metro mayors to coordinate actions and maintain clear communications. We would welcome discussing this further with you.

To conclude, as Mayors' in the Metro Vancouver region we want to assure to both of you that we want to work collaboratively with your government for the betterment of our residents and business community.

This is a stressful and trying time for us all. It is truly our moment to stand together. We know that by working together, along with the federal government, we can ensure that we give British Columbia residents the best chance of limiting the impact of this pandemic.

Yours Truly,

Gary Ander
Mayor of Bowen Island

Bill Dingwall
Mayor of Pitt Meadows

Mike Morden
Mayor of Maple Ridge

Neil Belenkie
Mayor of Belcarra

Jack Froese
Mayor of Township of
Langley

Kennedy Stewart
Mayor of Vancouver

Mary-Ann Booth
Mayor of West Vancouver

George Harvie
Mayor of Delta

Richard Stewart
Mayor of Coquitlam

Malcolm Brodie
Mayor of Richmond

Mike Hurley
Mayor of Burnaby

Darryl Walker
Mayor of White Rock

Linda Buchanan
Mayor of City of North
Vancouver

Mike Little
Mayor of District of North
Vancouver

Brad West
Mayor of Port Coquitlam

Jonathan Cote
Mayor of New
Westminster

John McEwen
Mayor of Anmore

Rob Vagramov
Mayor of Port Moody

Ron McLaughlin
Mayor of Lions Bay

Valaria Van den Broek
Mayor of City of Langley

c.c. Union of BC Municipalities
Federation of Canadian Municipalities