

NE RMs band together with signing of MOU

By Ivy Wilson

Several of the northeast's Rural Municipalities are a step closer to finding a solution to the aging bridge infrastructure in the area after signing a Memorandum of Understanding that will allow them to lobby the government collectively.

Forming the North East Quadrant are the Rural Municipalities of Bjorkdale, Connaught, Hudson Bay, Kelvington, Nipawin, Porcupine, Preeceville, Tisdale and Torch River who met at the Tisdale RECplex last Friday to sign the MOU.

Bob McPherson, who has been a consultant with the group speaking to federal and provincial bodies noted that the step was a very important one for the group.

"This MOU is one of the steps that we need to do to go forward," he said. "We started out as a group of municipalities who had a common idea and this is one of the building blocks for the foundation of what we need to do, because as soon as I go to the federal people they ask what group is that? And now we can say that this is a solidified group that have a memorandum of understanding and want to work together."

Two years ago the idea was born that if the municipalities worked together some they be able to make some leeway on what has become a major issue in the northeast and across

are now in the 50+ year old range and they weren't built to last longer than that," explained Chabot. "(The flooding) just brought bridges that were just on the edge of repair down to absolutely needing a lot of repair. The situation we had this summer and what we may have next spring is not going to improve on it."

Through consultation the group has learned that in order to address all of the bridges in the area a sum of \$300 million would be required to address the issue, but through working together the RMs feel that they can access significant savings.

"Ultimately our goal is to work as a group to do purchasing and everything-the whole scenario of building bridges, looking after bridges, right from management to engineering to the whole thing and if we can do it as a group of people we can do it cheaper," explained Wes Black, Reeve of the RM of Porcupine.

Bob Jackson, the Reeve of the RM of Tisdale thinks that a saving of \$150,000 per bridge could be realized.

"We have really addressed some major savings by being able to access materials ourselves," he said. "If you go in and offer to pay cash there are huge savings and we are all taxpayers and it is our money regardless of who does it, and we can cutback the cost of the bridges sig-



Eight of the nine Rural Municipalities signing were present last Friday afternoon to sign a Memorandum of Understanding to address bridge infrastructure. (Back L-R) Stan Elmy-Kelvington, Dennis Scott-Torch River, Wayne Dmytriv-Bjorkdale, Lyle Larsen-Nipawin, Neal Hardy-Hudson Bay, (Front L-R) Bob Jackson-Tisdale, Francis Chabot-Connaught, Wes Black-Porcupine.



Reeve Bob Jackson and Administrator Fern Lucas signed a MOU last week on behalf of the RM of Tisdale that will see them work with eight other RMs in the Northeast.

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ne a major issue in the northeast and across the province. The group accessed funding from the municipalities who have been involved along the way and also accessed funding from the North East Enterprise Region to cover the cost of the various consultations that have been needed to go forward.

Francis Chabot, the Reeve of the RM of Connaught noted that the infrastructure situation was about as close to a disaster scenario as possible in many of the RM's.

"A lot of these bridges are the lifelines for our rural people," he said. "We actually have bridges there that have weight restrictions on it that would not allow an ambulance or a fire truck to go over it, which are going to one or two or three peoples yards sometimes, so how do we deal with that? And they are legally bound to not go over that bridge."

In the Northeast alone there are over 400 bridges, many of which have been around since they were built in the 40's and 50's and are in need of repair. Combine that with the flooding experienced in recent years and costs increase again.

"When the roads were getting built in the 40's and 50's-like every other infrastructure in Canada and North America-we have been ignoring it and putting it aside because of the cost. Most of these structures

does it, and we can cutback the cost of the bridges significantly."

There is currently a cost-sharing arrangement in place with the provincial government, but the RMs would like to see more federal government involvement as they often have a hard time meeting their portion of the costs. Currently the level of cost sharing varies depending on factors, like the grade of the road.

"We have to get the point across that even though there is a cost sharing process in these bridges, we can't afford our portion of the cost sharing," said Black. "If we are looking at 25, 30, 40, 50 per cent sometimes-when you are looking at a \$700,000 or \$800,000 bridge, we can't afford those numbers and this is where we are feeling that the feds need to come in and readjust or rethink that cost-sharing measure. Right now we don't get any direct funding from the feds and that is where we have to get to -we have to get some kind of cost-share to help offset the costs for the municipalities."

Black noted that one challenge the group has faced when they meet with different agencies and politicians is that they feel that some of these roadways should just be closed rather than fixed, not realizing that the RMs have already been diligent in deciding what roads they need to keep and what roads can be closed.

Reeve Bob Jackson and Adm. of the RM of Tisdale that will see them work with eight other RMs in the Northeast.

"The mentality that we are facing when we go to some of these agencies is that they just assume that some of these rural roads should be closed. They don't realize that someone's livelihood may be on the wrong side of the river and you have to get there," Black said. "As a municipality we have eliminated any bridge that we don't need up to this point in time...We have already streamlined our infrastructure to the point where we can't go any fewer bridges." Chabot was hopeful that

work that the group has done will be of benefit to the rest of the province's RMs as well one day.

"We have learned just a tremendous amount about bridge work, repair, costs and general maintenance and management, which I think is important that we all learn with the amount of bridges we have got in this area," he said.

"At the end of the day, the result isn't just going to be for the North East, whatever we establish is going to help across the province."

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