Multi-Year Capital Planning

In 2013, the Financial Management Best Practice Committee (FMCBC) was reconvened to identify core financial best practices for municipalities in Nova Scotia. Multi-Year Capital Planning was selected to be part of this group of essential best practices. The original recommended practice was developed by the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA). Some aspects of the practice have been revised by the Financial Management Capacity Building Committee (FMCBC) for use by Nova Scotia municipal governments. The original GFOA recommended practice is *Multi-Year Capital Planning*, approved by the GFOA in 2009. Other sources used are footnoted in the text.

Recommendation

The GFOA recommends that local governments prepare and adopt a comprehensive multi-year capital plan to ensure the effective management of capital assets. A prudent multi-year capital plan identifies and prioritizes expected needs based on a municipality's strategic plan, establishes project scope and cost, details estimated amounts of funding from various sources, and projects future operating and maintenance costs. A capital plan should be over a period of at least three years, preferably five or more.

Purpose

A multi-year capital plan should be prepared for all municipal infrastructure, for instance water, sewer, transportation, sanitation, and other essential public services. It is also an important component of a municipality's strategic plan. It is difficult for municipal governments to address the current and long-term needs of their constituents without a sound multi-year capital plan that clearly identifies capital and major equipment needs, maintenance requirements, funding options, and operating budget impacts.

In addition, municipalities may also benefit from a multi-year capital plan for the following reasons:

- A multi-year capital plan can help promote good infrastructure management where investment is needed to ensure basic health and safety for citizens.
- Carefully planned infrastructure investment can maximize the economic potential and attractiveness of the municipality.
- Prudent management of facilities and investments today can reduce future operating costs and help avoid higher replacement costs and unforeseen infrastructure failures in the future.
- When a multi-year capital plan is developed, a municipality can have greater financial health and sustainability, making it easier for them to collaborate on projects with other levels of government and various public and private

stakeholders. This can enhance the ability for municipalities to have access to more financing, funding, and grants.[1]

Municipalities should also consider adopting a multi-year capital plan because the identification and reporting of tangible capital assets is a requirement of the Public Sector Accounting Board standards[2].

Background

Multi-year capital plans should become an integral component of a municipality's budgeting process. Multi-year capital plans often become part of a municipality's annual budget report, and therefore, the capital plans would need to be updated on an annual basis. Multi-year capital plans should become a regular activity for municipalities to plan for future capital projects, and to be more sustainable. A properly prepared capital plan is essential to the future financial health of a municipality with continued delivery of services to citizens and businesses. Furthermore, multi-year capital plans should be developed in a manner that is sensitive to its impact on taxes.

Municipalities should also consider developing a multi-year capital plan because of the Canada-Nova Scotia Agreement on the Transfer of Federal Gas Revenues. Under the requirement of the Canada-Nova Scotia Agreement, municipalities in Nova Scotia must submit a Capital Investment Plan (CIP) annually (September 1st), to be eligible for funding. A CIP is a multi-year plan produced by a local government that identifies capital projects to be funded covering a period of five years or more. A Nova Scotia CIP tool is now available at: http://www.nsinfrastructure.ca/pages/Capital-Investment-Plan.aspx. It should be noted that a CIP is not necessarily a substitute for a multi-year capital plan.

[1] Hattery, Mike and Duane Wilcox. "How to Develop a Multi-Year Capital Plan Planning Saves Time and Money". Water Sense. Summer 1999.

[2] Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations. "Nova Scotia Implementation Guide to Tangible Capital Assets for Municipalities. February, 2009. http://www.gov.ns.ca/snsmr/pdf/mun-guide-tangible-capital.pdf

Considerations for Policy Development

In order to develop a multi-year capital plan, municipalities should follow a comprehensive step-by-step process. *Appendix I* is a detailed description of how a municipality can develop its own multi-year capital plan. However, developing a multi-year capital plan may prove to be difficult for municipalities because the extensive and complicated nature of developing a comprehensive capital plan. *Appendix II* outlines some challenges that may be encountered when developing a multi-year capital plan, as well as some of the potential solutions to resolve the challenges.

Lastly, *Appendix III* includes a practical example of how to present a multi-year capital plan to the public within the annual budget. This can be helpful once municipalities have implemented its multi-year capital plan, and the information needed to be presented in an understandable format.

Appendices

Appendix I: Developing a Multi-Year Capital Plan

If municipalities want to develop a multi-year capital plan, they should consider a variety of components. Typically, the multi-year capital plan becomes part of the municipality's annual budget, and there are some similar aspects found in a multi-year capital plan and an annual budget. The following are steps to develop a multi-year capital plan, which can help municipalities develop their own plan.

1. Establish Goals and Objectives

A multi-year capital plan is best developed in the context of a larger strategic plan that indicates a municipality's mission, vision, goals, and objectives. Capital projects should support the municipality's long-term goals.[3] The following components should be included in a municipality's capital plan to demonstrate the municipality's goals.

Municipal Goals

- An agreement on future objectives can be a useful guide to those approving capital projects for future investment.
- The capital planning process may be greatly enhanced if goals can be agreed upon and established.[4]

Financial Policy and Goals

- The capital plan can act as a cornerstone to the development of the municipality's financial plan.
- Setting a multi-year financial plan creates an important base that can enable a feasible capital plan.
- Key financial policies state goals or guidelines for important financial items, such as the percent of the annual budget to be committed to capital improvements, limits on the size of annual debt service, and limits on total debt outstanding.
- Existing basic financial policy or goals will make it much easier to develop a multi-year capital plan.[5]

2. Setting Ground Rules and Developing a Comprehensive Policy

Capital planning is an annual process. Setting ground rules for the process and deciding who will take on various roles and responsibilities is an important early step that can help avoid confusion and improve the potential for success. The following ground rules should be established:

- Determine the capital planning group

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[3] Office of the State Comptroller Division of Local Government Services & Economic Development. Local Management Guide Multi-Year Capital Plans. State of New York. April 2003.

[4] Hattery, Mike and Duane Wilcox. "How to Develop a Multi-Year Capital Plan Planning Saves Time and Money". Water Sense. Summer 1999.

[5] Ibid.

  - Having a small group of three to six people to make important decisions concerning the capital planning process can provide more legitimacy to the capital planning process.
- Determine the length of the capital planning period
  - The capital planning periods are typically five or six years long.
- Determine how the capital projects will be defined
  - A definition of the capital project should be determined to provide guidance to those who will be asked to develop capital project proposals. Capital plans should be at least five years, but longer time spans are normal.
  - A definition of what the capital threshold is, and the difference between operating and capital expenditures.
- Determine who will make the projections and gather the data
  - A good candidate for coordinating the projection of expenditures and revenues is usually the treasurer. Department heads should also be responsible for providing updated forecasts. A municipal officer who works with the budget, understands how costs are likely to increase, and what the Council is likely to approve for expenditures, should be included in the capital planning process.
- Determine who will review the reports and approve the final capital plan
  - Council and other members of the municipality who were involved with the capital plan should be involved in approving the final plan.
- Determine the schedule for developing the capital plan
  - There should be an annual schedule for developing the multi-year capital plan. This schedule should be reviewed annually, and the areas of success and areas of improvement should be determined to make the appropriate changes.[6]

The ground rules are an important aspect in developing a capital plan, but they do not necessarily have to become part of the capital plan's formal policy. However, municipalities may want to make some of the ground rules part of a formal policy to ensure that they are carried on from year to year, but many aspects of the ground rules may change. The following components are different from the ground rules in that they should remain to maintain a constant and steady capital plan. These components should be included in a municipality's capital planning process formal policy:

- Council's involvement;
- Legal ramifications;
- Program coordination responsibilities;
- Information requirements (content, timing, and sources);
- Record-keeping;
- Acquisition and procurement criteria;
- Request process;

[6] Hattery, Mike and Duane Wilcox. "How to Develop a Multi-Year Capital Plan Planning Saves Time and Money". Water Sense. Summer 1999.

- Approval process;
- Budget information;
- Financing;
- Program modifications;
- Performance measures; and
- Reporting requirements.

A comprehensive policy should address each of these items in detail and in relation to identified goals and objectives.[7]

3. Estimate Fiscal Capacity

An important preliminary step is to use existing records and local knowledge to help construct a multi-year financial picture to aid in establishing a realistic capital plan. In this step, municipalities can project operating expenditures and revenues and taxable assessed value for real property for each budgetary fund for the multi-year planning period. Records should also be consulted to gather data on existing debt service commitments and the status of reserves. Projecting revenues, operating expenditures, and transfers to reserves help build an essential financial picture for capacity planning purposes.

- Projection Rules
  - Recent patterns of change and knowledge of unique factors and circumstances are important guides for projecting future revenue and expenditure growth. The projection process is not meant to provide an exact financial forecast. Some of the expenditures may remain stable, while others may fluctuate. Due to some unpredictability, it is wise to estimate revenue growth slightly on the low side and expenditure growth slightly on the high side of real expectations.
- Reducing the Number of Items to Project
  - The easiest method for reducing the projection workload is to project total expenditures (less transfers to reserves) and total revenues for each fund. It would be more effective to examine these two items over several years.
  - A second approach to reduce the number of items is to project the significant revenue and operating expenditure accounts and lump the smaller accounts into an 'other' category for projection purposes.[8]

The Nova Scotia Municipal Finance Corporation offers a Debt Affordability Model for municipalities, which can help create projection rules and reduce the number of items to the capital project. The Debt Affordability Model would complement a multi-year capital plan, where the multi-year capital plan could project the future projects and future

[7] Office of the State Comptroller Division of Local Government Services & Economic Development. Local Management Guide Multi-Year Capital Plans. State of New York. April 2003.

[8] Hattery, Mike and Duane Wilcox. "How to Develop a Multi-Year Capital Plan Planning Saves Time and Money". Water Sense. Summer 1999.

spending capacity, and the debt affordability model can help identify the municipality's capability to fund the projects. [9]

4. Prepare Information about Proposed Capital Projects

Municipalities should identify potential projects and develop and record the information. The ideal method for developing a capital plan is to begin with a full inventory of capital assets, which notes the condition of assets and provides a basis for developing a prioritized list of needed capital and equipment items. Combining the results of a capital assets inventory with plans for new capital items linked to new building and development needs would constitute a relatively comprehensive approach.[10]

5. Setting Criteria for Capital Projects

The selection criteria for acquisitions should be clearly identified in the policy document. The policy document should list, define, and rank the selection criteria in order of importance so that the municipality can effectively gauge their requests. The criteria should remain uniform, and it should be applied to all suggested projects in order to remain unbiased. Projects should be ranked against all criterions. The ranked list should be a direct result of the information gathered and developed in relation to the goals and objectives. Municipalities may consider some of the following criteria categories:

Legal Requirements

- These projects are funded based on the need to comply with legally mandated requirements established by the federal, provincial, or the municipal government.
- These types of projects may be required as a result of agreements with other government agencies to meet current codes, ordinances, or health and safety issues.

Asset Rehabilitation

- These types of projects demand funding for improvements necessary to the functioning of facilities or infrastructure. This criterion measures the extent that a facility or infrastructure has deteriorated and needs improvements relative to the overall condition of similar structures.
- Bridge repairs, storm water infrastructure improvements and repairs, and roadway resurfacings highlight a variety of public works related projects that would fall under this criterion.

Efficiency Improvements

- This criterion measures whether the completed projects will increase efficiency or result in overall cost savings to the municipality. Such projects may benefit a

[9] Municipal Finance Corporation. Municipal Debt Affordability Model AMA 2005 Annual Spring Workshop. Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia Municipal Finance Corporation, 2005.
[10] Office of the State Comptroller Division of Local Government Services & Economic Development. Local Management Guide Multi-Year Capital Plans. State of New York. April 2003.
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greater number of people or more efficiently and effectively provide and support the defined functional requirements of the intended use.
- Some examples of efficiency are projects that may include renovation to offices, layout or workspace within a building, planning or zoning a department where a smoother and more fluid processing of plans equate to time and savings and increased customer service.

Revenue Producing
- Projects that would fall under this criterion would generate additional revenues to the municipality. Projects of this nature show an overall return on investments, and should be measured for the risk involved. The criterion also measures the number of people who will benefit from the project, both directly and indirectly, and the associated costs versus revenues generated.
- Elements considered in the rating include the project type and overall community needs. This may include projects with a community centre or a public park.

Service Improvements
- These types of projects demonstrate an increase in delivery capability when completed. This criterion can also measure the number of people served and the benefit derived from a project.
- Projects that involve replacements and renewals that bring facilities up to Council's standards would fall under this category.

Service/Space Expansion
- These projects would result in the expansion of space to serve the needs of the community.
- Such projects, typically parks or public facilities, would include renovations, additions, expansions, or new construction of recreation centres, fire stations, policing facilities, and new services.[11]

Ultimately, the benefits identified with a particular project should be compared to the total costs, both initial and ongoing. When anticipated costs exceed identified benefits, managers should take into account both the financial and non-financial attributes of the program. To justify a costly project and move it forward, managers can consider identifying additional benefits, obtaining additional funding, or cutting costs.

As part of project selection, a capital assets policy should outline the review and approval process. Capital project requests that meet the selected criteria may need approval from various municipal entities or external advice. All aspects of the major capital projects, including the identified benefits, estimated costs, and anticipated financing should be verified before final approval is given.[12]

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[11] The City of Miami Dade County Florida. 2005-2006 Capital Budget and Multi-Year Capital Plan. http://www.miamigov.com/CapitalImprovements/docs/CapitalPlan/1%20-%20Introduction.pdf#search=%222005-2006%20capital%20budget%20and%20multi-year%20capital%20plan%20miami%20introduction%20capital%20improvement%20plan%22.

[12] Office of the State Comptroller Division of Local Government Services & Economic Development.

6. Creating a Multi-Year Capital Plan

In order to create a comprehensive multi-year capital plan, the capital plan should be matched to existing assets. If capital asset records do not currently exist, an inventory of the municipality's assets should be conducted. An inventory will provide the municipality with valuable information on the current condition of its capital assets. An extensive capital inventory can become a costly undertaking, however, an updated capital asset record can provide significant managerial benefits to get information needed for developing a capital plan.

Municipalities can also use established goals, objectives, and priorities to target their inventory efforts. By focusing on a certain area or capital project that has been deemed a priority, municipalities can focus on a smaller scale inventory assessment. The assets chosen should reflect the goals and objectives set out by the municipality, and the assets that will help accomplish their goals and objectives. Those assets found to be in poor condition or no longer useful, may need to be replaced quickly because they may provide trade in value or cash.

Establishing current information on key capital assets is a beneficial and crucial step towards developing the multi-year capital plan. Managers should use the inventory information and established goals and objectives to prioritize the identified capital projects and purchases. The estimated costs assigned to these projects should be verified through discussions with the various stakeholders who are involved with the capital projects, and those who have expertise knowledge in the area of capital asset valuation.

A multi-year capital budget can require difficult decisions. The balancing of limited resources can become difficult because of the apparent unlimited demands. After the multi-year capital plan has been initially established, it will become easier to make decisions, and all capital projects do not have to be completed or paid in one year. With fiscal constraints, the nature and importance of individual projects will dictate which projects will be accomplished in one year and the others to be accomplished in years two, three, four, and beyond.[13]

7. Financing Capital Acquisitions

Capital acquisitions can consume large amounts of financial resources. A multi-year capital plan helps manage this consumption by scheduling expenditures over a number of years and by creating a financing plan to meet those expenditures. An effective plan can provide greater time to complete more complex and costly capital projects. A long-term schedule of capital outlays gives managers time to arrange for sufficient financing.[14]

Local Management Guide Multi-Year Capital Plans. State of New York. April 2003.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Office of the State Comptroller Division of Local Government Services & Economic Development. Local Management Guide Multi-Year Capital Plans. State of New York. April 2003.

8. Assessing Impacts on Tax Rates

The undertaking of a capital project can have a significant impact on subsequent operating budgets. This impact should be considered as part of any multi-year capital plan. When assessing the budgetary impact, all areas of the budget should be assessed, including the operating expenditures, debt, and revenues.

A municipality's ability to afford major expenditures needs to be determined in order to appreciate the types and sizes of projects that can be considered. The analysis of a municipality's financial capacity should include an examination of recent and anticipated trends in revenues, expenditures, debt, and unfunded liabilities. This analysis can help the scheduling of funding sources to:

- Keep the tax rate stable;
- Balance debt service and operating expenditures; and
- Determine available debt capacity and acceptable debt service levels.[15]

When estimating the impact of capital projects on the annual expenditures, consider potential cost savings, new operating costs and additional revenue changes. Depending on the criteria used to select the project, some acquisitions could generate cost savings. Even if the project was not selected for cost efficiency and savings, new equipment replacing old equipment typically means less money will be needed for maintenance and repair. These savings should be quantified and figured into the annual operating budget. Those capital acquisitions supporting new or expanded services may require new supplementary expenditures. Municipalities should also consider programs and services, such as water programs, that are not funded from tax rates. Similar analysis should be conducted on service charge funded programs to determine the potential cost savings or changes.

If funds were borrowed to finance all or part of a capital acquisition, the principle and interest payments to retire the resulting debt must be planned for in each year's budget for the life of the obligation.[16]

9. Implement the Annual Capital Budget

Once the capital plan has been updated for the current year, it can serve as the basis for the annual capital budget, which is part of the annual operating budget. In addition to the capital budget each year, preliminary work should be completed to ensure the current year's capital projects can move forward and projects scheduled in upcoming years can

[15] Division of Local Services' Municipal Data Management and Technical Assistance Bureau. Developing a Capital Improvements Program A Manual for Massachusetts Communities. March 1997. http://www.mass.gov/dor/docs/dls/publ/misc/cip.pdf

[16] Office of the State Comptroller Division of Local Government Services & Economic Development. Local Management Guide Multi-Year Capital Plans. State of New York. April 2003.

also progress. The primary work would include engineering, site preparation, securing financing, or seeking public comment, and participation. A scheduled of activities should also be developed and responsibilities should be correspondingly assigned.[17]

10. Monitoring Plan Results

Follow up is essential to determine if capital program goals are being met. Municipalities should conduct routine monitoring of approved capital projects to ensure that the projects remain on schedule and within budget. Asset performance and budget information should be tracked and communicated to Council in a timely manner. Similarly, relevant external factors should be monitored and reported. The capital budget should be updated regularly to modify the multi-year plan as conditions change.

Asset performance should also be evaluated. It should be determined if the capital purchases and projects have produced the expected results, if the long-term goals have been met, and if any changes are necessary.

Municipalities should monitor the external environment to help them anticipate changes that might impact the later years of the capital program. Changes in legislation, technology, or equipment may alter the focus of the capital plan. Changes in anticipated federal or provincial funding can impact the number and priority of planned projects. Circumstances may change within the municipality that directly affect the needs of the community. Citizen input may signal a change in direction. Managers should be aware of these external factors, and others, that can change the strategic and capital plans.

At a minimum, the multi-year capital plan should be reviewed annually. As the current year passes and projects progress, the needs of the following year come more into focus. Vague long-term goals and objectives become easier to determine. Furthermore, initial development may need to begin for a project with a future start date. The new budget including the implications of the multi-year capital plan should be developed and approved for the upcoming year.

After the initial capital plan has been completed and projects have begun, a review of the planning process should be completed to determine if changes should be made to improve the process. Participants in the planning process should provide input as to the aspects of the process that were successful, and those that should be modified.[18]

[17] Hattery, Mike and Duane Wilcox. "How to Develop a Multi-Year Capital Plan Planning Saves Time and Money". Water Sense. Summer 1999.

[18] Office of the State Comptroller Division of Local Government Services & Economic Development. Local Management Guide Multi-Year Capital Plans. State of New York. April 2003.

Appendix II: Preventing and Meeting Challenges

Encouraging a capital plan and a planning process can be difficult to promote because this process requires significant change. It is important to anticipate some of the challenges that may be encountered.

The capital budget should precede the annual budget process.
The capital planning process of updating the multi-year plan should precede the annual budget process. The capital plan portion of budget deliberations will extend the length of the formal budget process. As the capital planning process is implemented, it might appear to both extend and complicate the annual budgeting activities. Initially this is true because changing the budget practices will take longer as adjustments are made and the problems begin to be resolved. As the capital plan progresses over the years, the ease and benefits of the capital plan will become evident.

Capital planning opens up a range of policy and prioritization.
As the capital plan development progresses, a range of prioritization issues begin to emerge. Furthermore, ongoing conflict may become exposed, which may not necessarily be because of the capital plan. The capital plan is merely exposing the conflicts and risks that may have already existed. In order to address these conflicts, select the most important first and try to resolve it as much as time and resources permit.

Be aware of changes in control over capital decisions.
The changes involved in initiating a capital plan may bring new people into the decision making process and this may threaten others who have had control over decisions in the annual budget process. It is important to be aware of the challenges that this may occur among those involved in the capital planning process. Furthermore, new Councils may change the priorities of capital decisions.

Expect challenges to those who staff the budget process.
Change can be disruptive and upsetting for those responsible for budget preparation. Adequate time should be given to assess potential changes in work and workload for staffing the annual budget process. Those involved with the budget preparation should be told why a capital plan is necessary, and seek input on how to proceed. Furthermore, municipalities should be open to the need to seek training or outside assistance, particularly in the developmental years.[19]

[19] Hattery, Mike and Duane Wilcox. "How to Develop a Multi-Year Capital Plan Planning Saves Time and Money". Water Sense. Summer 1999.

Appendix III: Multi-Year Capital Plan Report Model

When developing a multi-year capital plan, municipalities should publish the information and progress to the public. Typically, multi-year capital plans become part of the municipality's budget, and the capital plan will need to be presented in an understandable and readable format. The following are some suggestions municipalities may choose to integrate into the multi-year capital plan that is presented to the public. These suggestions have been taken from the Province of Alberta's multi-year capital plan, but have been modified to be applicable to Nova Scotia municipalities.

Section A – Support for Capital Infrastructure

Municipalities should indicate their commitment to capital planning and infrastructure development. They should demonstrate whether the municipality is spending more or less on capital projects.

If there are any significant changes, the municipality should describe the specific areas where funding has increased or decreased. Municipalities should provide the rationale behind the changes in how the capital fund has been allocated.

Municipalities should provide graphs and charts to make this information appealing and easier to understand. This section should also include the actual budget figures associated with the changes in the capital plan.

Section B – Detailed Capital Plan

The capital plan report can also provide a detailed description of the capital plans for its planned years. The description should be broken down into the municipality's specific areas of focus. This could include a detailed description of the funds allocated to the specific project, what will be built, what will be maintained and repaired, and what the future plans are for the project.

Section C – Capital Plan Funding Sources

Municipalities could also include a section to describe how the municipality has received the finances to fund the capital projects. This can include a concise budget, as well as other alternative means of funding.

In addition to the description of the funding sources, municipalities should also include a detailed capital budget. This capital budget would also include the targets for the future years of the multi-year capital plan.

For a complete version of the Province of Alberta's multi-year capital plan, please visit: http://finance.alberta.ca/publications/budget/budget2013/fiscal-plan-capital-plan.pdf. Furthermore, municipalities may also find it helpful to use a spreadsheet to quantitatively outline their multi-year capital plan. Such a spreadsheet could include the years over which the municipalities will be financing their existing and planned capital projects. The projects can be divided by priority or be grouped into a specific category.

Municipalities in Nova Scotia can perform multi-year capital planning with the CIP tool offered by the Canada-Nova Scotia Infrastructure Secretariat. This tool enables municipalities to play five or ten years in advance. The CIP tool can be accessed at: http://www.nsinfrastructure.ca/pages/Capital-Investment-Plan.aspx

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