NCCHPP NATIONAL COLLABORATING CENTRE FOR HEALTHY PUBLIC POLICY

Municipal Decision Making: Guidance for Public Health

FACT SHEET 3

MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE AND PUBLIC HEALTH IN CANADA 2026

FOREWORD

This fact sheet presents the main stages in the decision-making process within Canadian municipalities. It is part of a collection of fact sheets on municipal governance in Canada. This collection is intended for public health organization staff who wish to better understand how municipalities operate in order to position themselves strategically, collaborate effectively with the municipal sector, and exercise influence for health-promoting municipal decisions. This collaboration is important, as municipalities have a direct influence on living environments and therefore on key determinants of population health.

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KEY MESSAGES

- This fact sheet is part of a collection on municipal governance in Canada, intended for public health organizations seeking to collaborate with municipalities. It examines the municipal decision-making process and the respective roles of the municipal council and the municipal administration, to clarify when, how, and with whom to engage in order to influence decisions that support population health.
- The municipal council makes the decisions, while the administration advises the council and implements those decisions. Although the administration does not hold formal decision-making power, it often exercises significant influence.
- Municipal staff are generally a strategic entry point for public health organizations.
- Committees of council—where they exist—offer another strategic entry point, as specialized bodies that issue recommendations before council votes.
- It is important to tailor messages to the profile of the municipal actors being engaged.
- Early engagement increases opportunities for influence, hence the importance of monitoring council agendas to identify emerging issues and collaborating with the administration as it prepares its recommendations.

Centre de collaboration nationale sur les politiques publiques et la santé
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ABOUT THE COLLECTION OF FACT SHEETS ON MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE

Municipal governments play a key role in shaping the communities in which we live, directly influencing population health and wellbeing (Lévesque et al., 2024; Morestin, 2020). This capacity for action makes municipalities relevant—and even essential—partners for public health. A better understanding of how municipalities operate makes it possible to position oneself strategically, identify the right contacts among municipal representatives, spot windows of opportunity and work effectively within municipal decision-making processes, while also setting realistic expectations.

With this in mind, the NCCHPP has developed a collection of thematic fact sheets on municipal governance in Canada, intended for the staff of public health organizations.

The content of this collection was developed in three phases:

- An analysis of guides for newly-elected municipal officials in Canada's ten provinces and three territories;
- A Canada-wide consultation with public health professionals (three focus groups and a questionnaire);
- A complementary review of scientific and government literature.

For more information, see the fact sheet outlining the project's context and methodology.

1 INTRODUCTION

This fact sheet discusses the key stages of the decision-making process within Canadian municipalities. It distinguishes the respective roles of elected officials and municipal staff, and the regulatory and administrative tools used to adopt local measures.

This fact sheet covers the following topics, in order:

- Key points on the division of roles in municipal decision making
- The stages of municipal decision making
  - Emergence of an issue
  - Council's decision on whether to address the issue
  - Delegation of the issue to the administration for study
  - Study and preparation of recommendations by the administration
  - Debate and decision by council
  - Implementation of council's decision by the administration
- Key considerations for public health in contributing to municipal decision making.

2 KEY POINTS ON THE DIVISION OF ROLES IN MUNICIPAL DECISION MAKING

Both the municipal administration and council are involved in municipal decision making, each contributing complementary roles and perspectives (Table 1):

- **Municipal staff** provide the municipal council with the best possible advice, based on their expertise in their respective fields, so as to inform decision making;
- **Elected officials** make decisions that take into account not only the recommendations of the administration, but also the expectations of the people they represent (Fenn & Siegel, 2017; Siegel, 2020).

Table 1 Differences between the perspectives of the municipal council and the administration

Members of the municipal administration	Members of the municipal council
Rooted in a professional culture	Rooted in the local community
Allegiance to professional principles	Concern for re-election
Rational decision making	Seek compromise among various groups
Long-term horizon	Short-term horizon

Adapted from Fenn & Siegel (2017).

For a more detailed account of the respective roles of the municipal council and the municipal administration, as well as of the bodies within them, including committees of council, the executive committee, the chief administrative officer, etc., we invite you to consult Fact Sheet 1 and Fact Sheet 2 in this collection.

In addition to the distinct perspectives and roles of elected officials and municipal staff, in large cities,[1] it is common for elected officials to be assisted by political staff. Political staff members are not supposed to substitute for the administration in the development of municipal policies, nor are they supposed to act as intermediaries between elected officials and municipal staff. Their role is normally limited to advising elected officials on political strategy or assisting them in their district offices (Fenn & Siegel, 2017). For public health organizations, it is useful to be aware of the presence of political staff, but they are not contacts with whom to discuss the substance of public policy.

[1] "Municipality" is a generic term that refers to municipalities of all sizes, from the smallest to the largest. The term "city" refers to a category of municipalities—those of relatively larger size. It is a commonly-used term, but one that does not have a uniform, objective definition across Canada; for example, the population threshold required to qualify as a city varies from one jurisdiction to another (Graham, 2018). In this collection of fact sheets, we sometimes use the term "city" with qualifiers (large cities, mid-sized cities) to give a sense of the type of context being discussed.

3 THE STAGES OF MUNICIPAL DECISION MAKING

Here are the typical stages in the municipal decision-making process:

1. An issue requiring a decision is brought to the attention of the municipal council.
2. The municipal council decides whether or not to address the issue.
3. If it decides to address the issue, the council asks the administration to study the situation.
4. The administration submits recommendations.
5. The municipal council debates and votes.
6. The administration implements the municipal council's decision.

This is a theoretical scenario. In reality, the respective roles of the municipal council and the administration may not be so clearly defined. This will become apparent as we examine each of these stages.

3.1 Emergence of an issue

An issue may be brought to the attention of the municipal council through various channels and for various reasons, including:

- The mayor's commitment to achieving certain goals;
- The desire of municipal councillors to respond to requests from residents of their districts or from community groups advocating for various interests;
- Due to its having been placed on the agenda by the chief administrative officer;
- Media pressure when an issue makes headlines (for example: encampments of people experiencing homelessness);
- A private sector project that requires amendments to municipal by-laws (e.g., real estate development, installation of a factory);
- Comments from citizens or community organizations during the question period at a municipal council meeting;
- A formal delegation by community members or organizations before the municipal council or one of its committees;[2]
- A requirement imposed by the provincial or territorial government on municipalities (for example: the obligation to adopt an emergency management program);
- A call for proposals for a government transfer program—that is, funding from the provincial/territorial or federal government to finance municipal projects[3] (Graham, 2018; Sancton, 2015; Siegel, 2015, 2020; Tindal et al., 2016).

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2 For more information on delegations, see Fact Sheet 5 on public participation in municipal affairs.

3 For more information on intergovernmental transfers, see Fact Sheet 4 on the municipal budget.

3.2 Municipal council's decision on whether to address the issue (or not)

Unless required by the provincial or territorial government, the municipal council can choose whether or not to address an issue brought before it.

The most obvious reasons for refusing to do so are the issue being perceived as irrelevant, or too politically sensitive, or the municipality lacking the capacity to act. There are other valid reasons:

- The issue does not fall under the municipality's authority. It is the responsibility of municipal staff—a group that, as a whole, is generally more familiar with the relevant legislation than elected municipal officials are—to indicate to the council the areas in which it has no legal authority to act (Sancton, 2015; Tindal et al., 2016).
- The mayor is unable to secure sufficient support for the proposal from the other members of the municipal council. Contrary to popular belief, the head of the municipal council often has no authority of their own, apart from that conferred by the council's decisional authority (Graham, 2018).

The decision to take up an issue brought before it rests with the municipal council. However, in some municipal councils, it is acceptable for the chief administrative officer—and even department heads—to offer advice. In other municipal councils, elected officials expect the administration to remain passive until a formal request is made (Siegel, 2020). This variation depends largely on the personalities involved.

Although a municipal council may be inclined to respond immediately to a request made during a council meeting, major decisions generally require prior consultation with the administration to inform the council's decision (Fenn & Siegel, 2017).

3.3 Delegation of the issue to the administration for study

If the municipal council determines that an issue warrants further consideration, it refers it to the administration. In many municipalities, the latter requires a formal request approved by the council to ensure a request is serious before devoting time to it (Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators [CAMA], 2025; Fenn & Siegel, 2017).

That said, even formal requests may lack clarity. This is particularly true in the absence of municipal political parties, which is the case in the vast majority of municipalities outside of Québec; or in the absence of an executive committee to provide overall direction; or when the mayor has difficulty rallying the municipal council.

In such cases, the request the municipal council submits to the administration can result from so many compromises—designed to accommodate the respective positions of elected officials—that it becomes vague (Graham & Helmer, 2023; Tindal et al., 2016). Elected officials may also struggle to articulate their expectations precisely, even if they are in agreement. With respect to matters such as land-use planning and economic development, staff may be told: "This is the sort of direction we want

to move in. We would like you to negotiate with the relevant groups and do the best you can to move us in that direction" (Tindal et al., 2016, p. 241).

It is the role of the chief administrative officer (CAO) to forward requests from the municipal council to the appropriate teams. When these requests are unclear, CAOs must first have them clarified. This often takes place outside of municipal council meetings, during conversations with the mayor. When elected officials are not very engaged or are unable to clearly articulate their expectations, the CAO may end up playing a greater role in defining the municipality's orientations than their formal role would normally prescribe (Graham, 2018).

3.4 Study and preparation of recommendations by the administration

Municipal staff most often draw on established interventions when preparing their recommendations for the municipal council. The most common approaches when asked to study an issue are to examine:

- Whether the issue has ever come up before, and if so, how it was handled;
- How neighbouring or similar municipalities are addressing this issue (Sancton, 2015; Tindal et al., 2016).

This approach is widespread at all levels of government. It is more reassuring to propose a solution that has been tested elsewhere and proven successful than to propose something new.

To learn more, see: *How Can We Promote the Borrowing of a Public Policy Already Tested Elsewhere?* (National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy, 2024).

The municipal administration may also organize public consultations at this stage in order to gather perspectives from residents and community organizations. The information collected can then be incorporated into the analysis and the recommendations presented to the municipal council to support its decision making.[4]

Municipal staff formulate recommendations based on their professional expertise, which may be technical, financial, legal, or of another nature. When multiple municipal departments study an issue, their respective recommendations address the aspects of the issue that relate to their area of responsibility. CAOs play a key role in integrating and reconciling these different perspectives (Fenn & Siegel, 2017; Tindal et al., 2016). Depending on the CAO's personal leadership style and on the context, their involvement may be:

- Null: forwarding the reports received from department heads as is.
- Active: adding an explanatory note to reports which includes their own comments.
- Intrusive: altering reports to align them with their own vision (Tindal et al., 2016).

[4] For more details on public participation activities, see Fact Sheet 5.

The second scenario is the most common and the most desirable. It enables the municipal council to benefit from both the specialized expertise of municipal departments and the more comprehensive perspective of the CAO (Tindal et al., 2016).

Administration and politics: A delicate balance

According to the theoretical division of roles between the administration and the municipal council, municipal staff are supposed to make the best possible recommendations based on their professional expertise, free from complacency or political considerations, even if these recommendations risk displeasing, and being rejected by, the municipal council (Siegel, 2020). The reality is more nuanced and complex, as elected officials expect the recommendations to reflect some degree of pragmatism. Municipal staff therefore try to strike a delicate balance between:

- Taking local political realities into account, by considering what matters to the actors concerned by an issue, what may be a source of controversy or difficulty, and the questions that the public and the media are likely to raise; and
- Avoiding encroaching on the role of the municipal council**,** which includes exercising political judgment on the issues submitted to it, and avoiding appearing to be aligning with the position of some elected officials over others (Constantinou, 2017; Fenn & Siegel, 2017; Tindal et al., 2016).

Finding the right balance is not always easy, and results vary. Although some training and resources on political acuity are now available, this skill is still largely acquired through experience, observation, and practice—including trial and error. Most municipal staff therefore develop this capacity gradually over the course of their professional careers (CAMA, 2025; Constantinou, 2017).

This being said, the administration wields considerable informal influence at this stage. Staff possess technical expertise and, often, long-held positions in the municipal sector, that elected officials do not always have. In this sense, the latter are dependent on the administration (Graham, 2018). Staff can frame their recommendations in a way that influences how they are received. What information is included, how it is presented, whether or not certain aspects are emphasized, how different courses of action are compared, and the deliberate omission of certain options can all be calculated to strike a chord with the municipal council and encourage the adoption of the administration's preferred solution (Siegel, 2020; Tindal et al., 2016).

3.5 Debate and decision by the municipal council

3.5.1 The presentation of recommendations to the municipal council

Once the administration has prepared recommendations along with the supporting rationale, these are submitted to the municipal council:

- In written form, included among the documents that elected officials are required to review prior to a municipal council meeting;
- Sometimes, also in the form of a presentation given during the meeting by the CAO or by the relevant departments (Fenn & Siegel, 2017).

Staff recommendations are discussed at municipal council meetings, since that is where all elected officials gather and the administration is required to brief the entire municipal council. There may also be some behind-the-scenes preparatory work leading up to these public meetings. For example, elected officials are sometimes opposed to a recommendation because they misunderstand it yet are hesitant to ask for clarification during a public meeting. To avoid this, staff may speak with elected officials privately before the meeting to make sure they understand the proposal (Siegel, 2020). Similarly, it is best for an elected official to notify the administration of any objections they plan to raise during the meeting. This allows the administration to prepare a response; moreover, the elected official can avoid public embarrassment if the response is based on information that had escaped their attention (Fenn & Siegel, 2017).

3.5.2 decision and its tools

Decisions are made by a majority vote of the municipal council members.[5] The decision may be to act, to do nothing, or to ask staff for more information before making a decision.

BY-LAWS, RESOLUTIONS, POLICIES, MOTIONS… WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

To formalize decisions, municipal councils primarily use two tools:

- **By-laws** establish mandatory rules that apply to all residents of the municipality or to a specific area within its territory. A by-law may prohibit certain practices, impose standards, regulate the exercise of an activity, or establish requirements (Lévesque et al., 2024). Most of the time, the adoption of a by-law follows a formal process involving several readings at different meetings of the municipal council, which multiplies the opportunities for residents or external organizations to intervene in the debate.
- **Resolutions** are non-regulatory measures that generally do not impose new requirements on the population. They can be used to formalize administrative decisions, such as the awarding of a contract or the appointing of someone to a position, or to adopt a municipal policy (Lévesque et al., 2024).

Municipal **policies** set out general directions that guide the municipality's activities. While they are not binding directives, they allow the municipality to communicate the direction it has chosen to take and the role it intends to play in various areas.

A municipal **motion** is a proposal made by a council member during a council or committee meeting, for members to deliberate on a course of action, a policy direction, or a decision. Once adopted and recorded in the minutes, the motion becomes a resolution (Regional Municipality of Niagara, 2010; Reid & Reid, 2023).

[5] Barring the exceptions provided for in Ontario municipalities with “strong mayors” (see Fact Sheet 1).

3.5.3 The factors that influence the debate and the decision

In addition to the municipal administration's recommendations, elected officials take into account the positions of various groups that make their voices heard on the issues that matter to them:

- Their constituents (who are significant in terms of re-election prospects, especially if they form a neighbourhood association);
- Groups advocating for various social causes;
- Community-based organizations, service providers, and various partners including public health organizations;
- The business community: the chamber of commerce, homebuilders' associations, etc. (Sancton, 2015; Tindal et al., 2016).

In practice, municipal councils rarely challenge the recommendations of municipal staff on highly technical matters requiring specialized expertise that elected officials do not possess. Conversely, in the case of less technical matters, the political preferences and interests of elected officials carry more weight (Sancton, 2015). In addition, when elected municipal officials serve in a part-time capacity, they have less time to familiarize themselves with the issues under discussion, which makes them more susceptible to the arguments of municipal staff and external groups (Tindal et al., 2016).

Another factor that determines the intensity of debates at municipal council meetings is the level of municipal investment required. Unsurprisingly, proposals to build new infrastructure often spark the most animated discussions; for once a road, a park, or a water treatment plant has been built, it will require maintenance for decades to come. On the other hand, a policy statement whose implementation requires little or no municipal spending—for example, a resolution expressing the municipality's commitment to denouncing racism—may be more easily adopted, provided it addresses an issue on which there is broad consensus (Sancton, 2015).

The municipal council holds decision-making power and is entitled to disregard the administration's recommendations. If council's position is likely to create a risk for the municipality, it is the duty of staff to clearly explain that risk to the elected officials. Staff may propose a compromise solution, prepared in anticipation of expected opposition from the council; a solution that reduces the risk to the municipality while satisfying enough elected officials to obtain a majority vote (Siegel, 2020). Once these efforts to persuade have been made, the administration must not oppose the course of action chosen by the municipal council and must assist the council in drafting a resolution or by-law that upholds it (Fenn & Siegel, 2017).

THE ROLE OF COMMITTEES OF COUNCIL IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The literature offers very little insight into the role of standing and ad hoc committees in municipal decision making, perhaps because the existence of these committees, their composition, and their mandates vary greatly from one municipality to another. That said, when the decision concerns an issue that falls within a committee's mandate, the committee can be expected to become involved, particularly at the following stages:

- **Decision to address an issue (or not to):** when an issue is first brought before a committee, its members can decide whether or not to refer it to the full municipal council, thereby acting as a filter. (This observation was made during the focus groups organized by the NCCHPP, by a participant who represents their public health organization on a municipal committee.)
- **Formulation of recommendations:** the relevant committee may act as an intermediary prior to the municipal council debate:
  - The CAO or a department head presents the administration's recommendations to the committee members;
  - The latter ask questions, debate, consider the political context in conjunction with the administration's analysis, and then take a position;
  - One member—usually the committee chair—presents this position to the full municipal council, which holds decision-making authority (Fenn & Siegel, 2017; Plunkett et al., 2020).

In many municipalities, council committees also serve as a forum for hearing delegations from community members and groups (Sancton, 2015; Tindal et al., 2016). This allows committees to compare the analysis provided by the municipal administration with perspectives drawn from the community. A committee may hold these consultations at various stages of the decision-making process:

- To help the municipal council determine whether an issue should be examined;
- While the administration is studying an issue;
- Following the committee's review of the administration's recommendations.

For more details on public consultations, see Fact Sheet 5 on public participation in municipal affairs.

3.6 Implementation of the municipal council's decision by the administration

Municipal staff are responsible for implementing the municipal council's decisions. In theory, council must ensure that its decisions are implemented as intended. However, except in very small municipalities where there are few staff persons and their actions are more visible, it is difficult for elected officials to monitor closely all of the administration's activities (Sancton, 2015; Tindal et al., 2016).

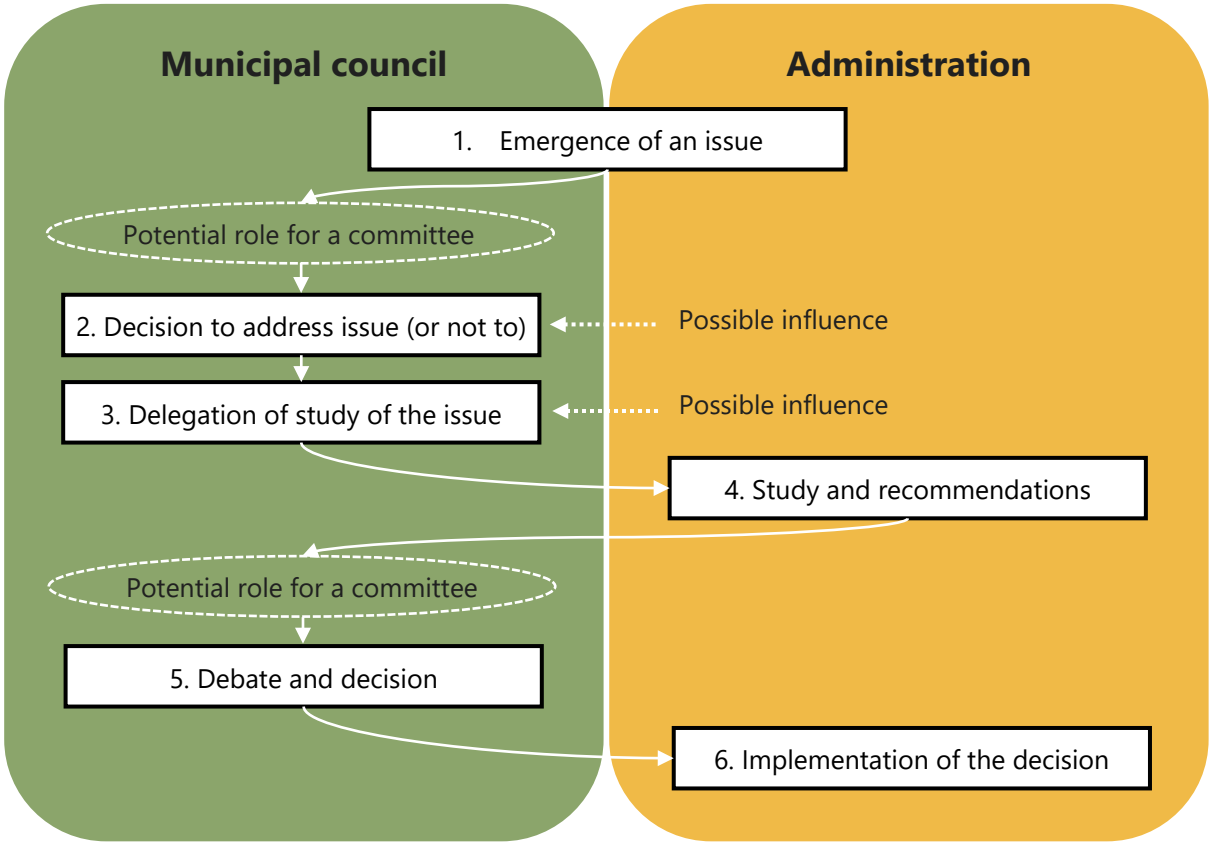
The administration therefore has some latitude, which it sometimes uses to its advantage. Municipal staff persons do not always accept that their recommendations—based on their expertise—are disregarded by a municipal council that lacks specialized knowledge of the subject under discussion. If the CAO allows it, the administration may sometimes deviate from the municipal council's intent when implementing a decision, or delay its implementation—especially given that elected officials only serve four-year terms (Constantinou, 2017; Graham, 2018).

In other cases, the discrepancy between a decision and its implementation is attributable to the municipal council. This can be explained, among other factors, by the following:

- The lack of shared directions among elected officials may result in the adoption of a vague statement designed to secure enough support to win a majority vote. The CAO must then interpret the decision in order to give staff clear, actionable implementation guidance (Fenn & Siegel, 2017).
- In some cases, the adoption of a "symbolic" decision by the municipal council—without any real implementation measures being planned—can create a gap between the intention expressed and the actions that follow (Sancton, 2015).

Figure 1 summarizes the decision-making process and the roles played by the different municipal bodies.

Figure 1 The division of roles in municipal decision making



4 IN PRACTICE – KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR WORKING WITHIN MUNICIPAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

In light of the municipal decision-making process described in this fact sheet, this section offers several considerations for public health organizations. It also draws on the following sources:

- The experiences shared by public health professionals in the focus groups organized by the NCCHPP (see our Methodology document) and during the external review of this fact sheet.
- A day of exchanges between the municipal and public health sectors at Québec's annual public health conference – *Journées annuelles de santé publique* 2025 (Tremblay & Gueppe, 2025).

4.1 Which municipal actors to approach

Here are some factors to consider relating to actors in the political sphere (Table 2) and in the administrative sphere (Table 3).

Table 2 Whom to approach in the political sphere

Institutions	Factors to consider
Municipal council	• Has the authority to make decisions. • External delegations may speak during council meetings, but their time is limited to a few minutes. • Council meetings are a non-specialized forum where a wide variety of topics are discussed.
A committee of council whose mandate relates to your subject of interest	• A more specialized deliberative body than the municipal council. • No decision-making authority, unless the municipal council has delegated authority to it. • Potentially significant influence: can filter what is presented to the municipal council and provide the latter with recommendations. • A body designed to hear the views of the public and external organizations. • Such a committee might not exist: check the municipality's website to see if any committees exist and what their mandates are.
Persons	**Factors to consider**
Mayor	• They may have greater influence over the municipal council in the following situations: – If they are backed by a political party that holds a majority on the municipal council (in large municipalities in Québec, British Columbia, and Alberta); – If they are "strong mayors" in Ontario; – If they are influential because of their personal leadership style. • They occupy a demanding position; one should assess whether it is appropriate to approach this person directly. • Direct contact may be possible in rural areas. In urban areas, such contact can only be initiated by senior public health officials, such as a Medical Officer of Health.
Councillor	• Councillor who chairs or sits on a committee: they are relevant to approach if the committee's mandate aligns with the issue you are interested in, in order to learn about the committee's work and the possibilities for engaging with it. • Councillor who is not a member of a committee: they are relevant to approach if your issue concerns their district, while not limiting your outreach to this person alone.
Political staff member	• Does not play a direct role in the decision-making process. • May serve as a point of contact for reaching an elected official.

Table 3 Whom to approach in the administrative sphere

Institution	Factors to consider
Municipal administration	• Does not have decision-making authority. • Has significant influence at various stages of the decision-making process. • Has control over the implementation of decisions. • Tends to operate in silos. As a consequence, this may require reaching out to all municipal departments whose mandates relate to a given issue and understanding how each one operates.
Persons	**Factors to consider**
Chief administrative officer	• Has varying levels of influence depending on the municipality: observe their interactions with the municipal council to assess their influence on decision making. • Has the least secure tenure among municipal staff. • A potential contact person in a small municipality, but their workload may limit their availability. • In a large municipality, does not get involved in the details of specific subject areas. It is best to contact the relevant municipal department directly.
Department heads and project officers	• Subject specialists, except in the smallest municipalities. • Can be identified on municipal websites (typically department heads, less often project officers) or by following municipal council meetings. • Remain in office longer than elected officials. • Possibility of staff turnover: stay in touch with more than one person to ensure a lasting relationship.

A third option for public health organizations is to approach municipal actors indirectly, by partnering with **community-based organizations**.

IN PRACTICE – NAVIGATING INSTITUTIONAL AND RELATIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Option 1 – Approaching elected municipal officials. A few points of caution:

- Decision-making authority rests with the municipal council as a whole. Having access to one person can open doors but does not guarantee a favourable decision.
- Elected officials serve for specific terms. Ask yourself whether there is enough time remaining in their current term to achieve the desired objectives.
- For staff in public health organizations who are civil servants within another level of government, directly approaching municipal elected officials can be delicate. Such outreach generally requires that their organization's hierarchy allows it, and that the level of government that employs them does not discourage these approaches.

Option 2 – Approaching municipal staff. This seems more appropriate and straightforward for public health personnel, on the whole.

Option 3 – Approaching municipal actors by partnering with community-based organizations. This option is particularly useful when:

- The public health organization has not yet established a relationship of trust with municipal actors, whereas community-based organizations already have well-established contacts;[6]
- The level of government employing public health personnel discourages them from reaching out to municipalities. In this situation, it may still be possible to work behind the scenes with community-based organizations that are able to interact directly with municipal actors.

4.2 How to engage with municipal decision making

What can you do to get an issue put on the agenda or to provide input regarding a municipal project?

- An **informal approach** is possible:
  - When you have already established contact: an email, a phone call.
  - In the case of an initial contact, it is best to suggest a meeting so you can introduce yourself properly and explain your proposal.
  - If you are unsure of whom to contact, reach out to someone you already know within the administration or on the municipal council and ask them to forward your request to the appropriate person. This approach is generally well received. There is no need to include multiple recipients; generally, the message will be readily forwarded (Morestin, 2019).
- You can also take advantage of **formal opportunities** offered by the municipality:
  - Request to make a presentation before a committee of council or at a council meeting;
  - Participate in public consultations;
  - Whenever possible, ask if your organization can sit on a committee of council.

[6] Regarding the establishment of trust-based relationships, see also Fact Sheet 6.

These formal opportunities make it possible, among other things, to bring a public health perspective to municipal actors. However, when they occur late in the decision-making process, their influence on the final decision may be limited. Engaging earlier with the municipal administration or through public participation processes often provides greater opportunities to influence the development of recommendations (Symonds, 2025; Moore & Caporale, 2024). Fact Sheet 5 examines in greater detail the opportunities for public participation offered by municipalities.

- Finally, a public health organization can **take a public stance** (through press releases, interviews) to put pressure on a municipality. However, this approach, which could antagonize the municipality, is not advisable if the goal is to establish collaborative relationships.

IN PRACTICE – CHOOSING HOW TO ENGAGE

Some points to consider when choosing a strategy:

- Is the approach under consideration private or public in nature, and what impact would a public approach have on the desired relationship with the municipality?
- Which person within the public health organization is best positioned to engage in dialogue with the municipality? Depending on the context, this may be the Medical Officer of Health, another member of senior management, or a staff member with particularly strong knowledge of local issues.
- Does the approach under consideration need to be approved by the leadership of the public health organization?
- Is this approach coordinated with those planned by other units within the organization, in order to avoid over-burdening the municipality? Such coordination is particularly important when a municipality is simultaneously revising several policies or by-laws related to public health issues.
- Does the position presented reflect a comprehensive public health perspective, rather than the concerns of a single team or area of expertise?

4.3 What to include in your message

For all municipal actors

- It is best to check whether your request or proposal concerns a matter that falls within the municipality's authority or should instead be directed to another level of government. If in doubt, municipal staff are best able to confirm whether a municipality has the authority to act (Sancton, 2015; Tindal et al., 2016).
- In some municipalities, council meeting agendas are accompanied by documents prepared by the municipal administration—reports, briefing notes, and so on. These public documents provide insight into how a municipality is approaching an issue and can help you tailor your message accordingly (Huron Perth Public Health, 2025).

- Proposing an initiative that has proven effective elsewhere inspires greater confidence and increases the likelihood of persuading your listeners (Sancton, 2015; Tchatat & Morestin, 2024). Ideally, this initiative should have been tested in a municipality within the same region or province; or in a municipality that is similar in terms of size, setting (urban/rural), socioeconomic context, etc.

For municipal staff

- The latter are rooted in a culture of professionalism and rational decision making, much like public health professionals (Fenn & Siegel, 2017). This said, it remains advisable to adapt your message to the level of qualification and specialization of your contacts with regard to the subject in question.
- In the case of certain highly technical subjects, assistance from public health may be welcome, both in small municipalities and even in large ones (subjects mentioned by focus groups include air quality, and health risks associated with uranium mines). Terms that are highly specific to public health must be "translated" into more general terms (Morestin, 2020).

For elected officials

- They pay close attention to what the population, various community groups, and other local actors think about an issue and how to address it (Fenn & Siegel, 2017). If your proposal aligns with the positions expressed by other groups, it is worth highlighting this (Wettlaufer & Marin, 2025). If it deviates from the positions of others, it is helpful to explain why. A public health organization may also choose to raise community awareness about an issue in order to help create a local context that is conducive to certain municipal decisions.
- Analyzing elected officials' positions on an issue can be useful. That said, public health professionals are not necessarily in a position to perform such an analysis. It makes sense to partner with municipal staff for this purpose: they know the elected officials better, are accustomed to tailoring the messages they convey to them, and are in a better position to lay the groundwork with elected officials before a proposal is presented at a municipal council meeting (Siegel, 2020).

IN PRACTICE – STRENGTHENING YOUR MESSAGE

Other fact sheets in this collection address cross-cutting themes that are important to consider in several aspects of collaboration with municipalities, including in the messages addressed to them.

- In Fact Sheet 2, the section on the legal framework outlines municipal jurisdiction and provides guidance for gaining a better understanding of municipal law in each province and territory. This helps determine whether a municipality is empowered to act in an area of interest for public health.
- Fact Sheet 4 addresses municipalities' budgetary contexts. Even when municipal actors are convinced of the value of an action proposed by public health, they must also consider their operational and long-term maintenance constraints (for example, upkeep of cycling infrastructure).
- Fact Sheet 6 outlines several promising approaches for collaborating with the municipal sector, including:
  - The importance of demonstrating the links between public health and municipal objectives, which are not immediately apparent to all municipal actors. This demonstration helps highlight how your request or proposal contributes to municipal goals such as quality of life, safety, the attractiveness of the municipality, economic development, or social cohesion.
  - The usefulness of demonstrating at least a basic understanding of what the municipality is already doing in the area of interest, and highlighting these actions.
  - The relevance of presenting the concrete support that you and your organization can offer in connection with your proposal.

4.4 What to expect when attempting to contribute to municipal decision making

- Even when the municipal council agrees to address an issue, the process that follows involves several steps and multiple actors and takes several months (barring exceptions that require an urgent decision). It is therefore important to adjust expectations accordingly and to exercise patience.
- The later an external actor becomes involved in the process, the less influence they have. This is why it is helpful to monitor the agendas and minutes of municipal council meetings, the reports attached to them, and the municipality's social media channels, to know when attention is being directed toward an issue (Lam et al., 2025).
- Collaborating with the municipal administration as it prepares its recommendations allows a public health perspective to be integrated through a natural channel for influencing elected officials, ensures that the recommendations produced are consistent with the municipality's authority and capabilities, and leverages the experience of municipal staff in framing the message (Siegel, 2020; Tindal et al., 2016). In return, some staff members believe that collaborating with public health lends greater credibility to their recommendations in the eyes of elected officials (Morestin, 2020; Tremblay & Gueppe, 2025).

- Some collaborative efforts are less successful. For example, when a municipality views a public health organization as a subcontractor when a health impact assessment is being conducted and is reluctant to accept certain conclusions; or, when a municipality presents a public health organization as a partner in assessing a project, in order to capitalize on the organization's legitimacy, but then fails to take its recommendations into account (input gathered during the focus groups organized by the NCCHPP).
- Many groups other than public health organizations submit requests and proposals to municipalities (Tindal et al., 2016). Therefore, a council could be dealing with many competing priorities.
- A proposal that would entail costs for the municipality is likely to face greater resistance, especially if those costs are recurring and long-term[7] (Sancton, 2015).
- If it seems likely that convincing the municipal council will be difficult, it may be wise to prepare a Plan B, a compromise proposal that remains appealing from a public health perspective while minimizing grounds for opposition among elected officials. In some cases, it may even be better to wait for a more opportune moment to present your proposal (Siegel, 2020).
- The adoption of a favourable decision by the municipal council does not mark the end of the process. An offer of public health support for implementation can be welcome, especially in small municipalities that lack capacity. This also helps keep track of progress in implementation while positioning public health as a credible resource and partner for the municipality.
- Finally, if the municipal council rejects the proposal, try again later. As a public health practitioner whose organization proposed the creation of a licensing fee for alcohol retailers in a municipality in 2016, 2018, and 2020—and plans to do so again in 2026—puts it: "Sometimes you win and sometimes you wait" (Wettlaufer & Marin, 2025).

[7] See Fact Sheet 4 on the municipal budget.

IN SUMMARY – KEY POINTS ABOUT MUNICIPAL DECISION MAKING

- The municipal council makes decisions, while the administration advises it and implements those decisions. However, the administration holds significant informal power.
- When they exist, municipal council committees can act as intermediaries between administration and council, and sometimes as a filter. They are also often a venue for hearing perspectives from the community.
- For public health organizations, it is generally easier and more appropriate to approach the municipal administration rather than elected officials (with the exception of council committees). Partnering with community organizations is another possible avenue. → *See section 4.1*
- Municipal decision making generally involves the following steps: emergence of an issue; council decision to address the issue; referral to the administration for analysis and recommendations; council decision; and implementation. → *See Figure 1*
- The earlier that a public health organization engages in the process, the greater the opportunities for influence. However, it is important to choose the most appropriate approach—informal or formal, private or public, choice of spokesperson, and coherence across the organization's various units. → *See section 4.2*
- Public health proposals are more relevant when they take into account municipal areas of jurisdiction, budget constraints, current priorities and actions, and the profile of the individuals being approached (notably, the level of specialization among staff, and the sensitivity of elected officials to the positions of community members and groups). → *See section 4.3*

Working within municipal decision-making processes requires patience and realism. The process can be lengthy, and a setback is not necessarily final. It may be worthwhile to reiterate a proposal at a later time.

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Municipal Decision Making: Guidance for Public Health

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