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**ALBERTA MUNICIPALITIES**

**LONELY AT THE TOP  
AN EXAMINATION  
OF THE CHANGING  
DYNAMICS FOR CHIEF  
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICERS  
IN ALBERTA MUNICIPALITIES**

Kate Graham and Jesse Helmer

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY . . . . . 1**
- INTRODUCTION . . . . . 2**
  - RESEARCH QUESTION AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH . . . . . 3
- PART I: THE ROLE OF THE MUNICIPAL CAO . . . . . 4**
  - ORIGINS . . . . . 4
  - CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE . . . . . 5
- PART II: TRENDS IN ALBERTA MUNICIPALITIES . . . . . 7**
  - TRENDS IN CAO TENURE . . . . . 7
  - VARIATION OVER TIME . . . . . 9
  - FREQUENCY OF CAO TRANSITIONS . . . . . 12
  - TIMING OF CAO TRANSITIONS . . . . . 15
  - OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS . . . . . 17
- PART III: INSIGHTS FROM CAOS . . . . . 18**
  - TRANSITION DECISIONS . . . . . 18
  - EXPERIENCES ON THE JOB . . . . . 20
  - FUTURE PLANS . . . . . 23
  - OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS . . . . . 23
- PART IV: LESSONS LEARNED . . . . . 24**
  - SETTING A STRONG FOUNDATION . . . . . 24
  - NAVIGATING THE JOB’S CHALLENGES . . . . . 25
  - ENDINGS AND TRANSITIONS . . . . . 26
  - OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS . . . . . 27
- PART V: CONCLUSIONS . . . . . 28**
  - SUMMARY OF FINDINGS . . . . . 28
  - IMPLICATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE VIABILITY . . . . . 28
- APPENDIX A: COMPARING CAO TENURE OVER TIME . . . . . 31**
- REFERENCES . . . . . 34**
- ABOUT THE AUTHORS . . . . . 36**
- ABOUT THE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY . . . . . 37**

# LONELY AT THE TOP

## AN EXAMINATION OF THE CHANGING DYNAMICS FOR CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICERS IN ALBERTA MUNICIPALITIES

Kate Graham and Jesse Helmer

*“The rise of the [chief administrative officer] profession is the expression of slowly developing changes in the attitude toward the fundamental nature of the problems of local government. [...] It is gradually coming to be admitted as consistent with the essential doctrines of democracy. [CAOs] represent in their professional capacity a determination to eschew the spoils system in government, a determination to keep the technical services of local government “out of politics,” and a deliberate attempt to consider the problems of municipal government as being problems of a national rather than a parochial character.”*

Ridley and Notling, *The City Manager Profession* (1934)

*“It’s really tough now. There’s a big disconnect between what you’re hired to do and then what’s expected of you — and when it runs awry, you’re kind of on your own.”*

Former Alberta municipal CAO (2023)

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper explores the role and tenure of chief administrative officers (CAOs) in Alberta municipalities and the implications for those municipalities. Using a mixed-methods approach that blends qualitative and quantitative analysis, this paper presents several important findings:

- The average tenure of a CAO in Alberta is now well under the length of one term of council. CAO tenure is generally shorter in smaller municipalities. More concerningly, the average length of tenure has been in a steady state of decline for the past two decades.
- The number of CAO transitions, including acting and interim roles, has been increasing in all types of municipalities — in some types of municipalities, double or triple the rate of CAO transitions in earlier time periods. The days of long-serving CAOs outside of cities appear to be waning, as the length of one council term becomes a harder cap on CAO tenure in those communities.
- The role of CAO involves important on-the-job learning. No two municipalities are the same; even two terms of council within the same municipality can have quite different dynamics. Shorter CAO tenures and higher rates of turnover mean more costly transitions: dollars spent on recruitments or severance packages; significant organizational disruption; and, importantly, a reduced opportunity for incumbent CAOs to reach peak performance in their roles.

- Current and past CAOs identify the increasingly tenuous political dynamics as a leading driver in role dissatisfaction and as a top consideration in decisions to join or depart from a municipality. There seems to be consensus that political dynamics are getting worse, not better. Among other insights about the experiences of CAOs, this emerged as the central theme of this paper.

The success and stability of CAOs collectively is an important indicator of the health of the municipal public service in Alberta and local government generally. Measures of this indicator are currently ringing alarm bells. Efforts to increase the stability of the CAO position — particularly greater role clarity through onboarding for CAOs and education for elected officials, improved relations between council and staff, regional support networks and efforts to build trust and respectful decorum between CAOs, councils and the public — would all mark steps in the right direction to strengthen local government in Alberta. Municipalities in Alberta can build on the existing foundation of intermunicipal collaboration and engagement with municipal associations to advance solutions to address these challenges. As one Alberta CAO stated, “it can feel lonely at the top” — but perhaps it doesn’t need to.

## INTRODUCTION

The past few years have been marked by a convergence of crises:

- A pandemic, including significant disruptions for every person and organization;
- “Echo pandemic” mental health and addictions struggles;
- Difficult economic times, including high levels of inflation, an affordability crisis particularly around housing, and supply chain disruptions;
- Heightened awareness and expectation to address longstanding inequities;
- The beginning of an unprecedented demographic wave, in which the baby boomers’ departure from the workforce will leave major knowledge and capacity gaps; and
- An escalation of major weather disasters related to the climate crisis, including wildfires in Alberta and many parts of Canada.

For governments in Canada, this period has also included low voter turnouts and high political division. According to the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer Canada, 57 per cent of Canadians no longer trust political leaders at all levels — a two-point increase from the year prior (2022).

What does all of this mean for Alberta’s municipalities? Specifically, how does it affect the realities faced by local government leaders and their collective capacity to serve their communities in times of high need?

The chief administrative officer (CAO, or city manager in urban municipalities) is the most senior public servant in Alberta’s municipal governments. This appointed position serves at the pleasure of the elected council and oversees all municipal services and staff. In large urban municipalities, the CAO leads a complex team of thousands of people with annual operating budgets greater than \$1 billion. In the smallest of municipalities, the CAO may be

the only administrative position (or may serve in a part-time capacity or shared across a few municipalities). The role varies enormously depending on the municipal context but in every municipality, it is a critically important position for the organization's continuity and provision of services to the community.

Anecdotally, there is a sense that finding (and keeping) talent in this role is a difficult challenge in Alberta, particularly in small communities. The CAO position seems increasingly characterized by a revolving door (at an escalating pace). Media stories often capture the sometimes dramatic exits of these senior public servants.

Do these anecdotes translate into observable trends? Is CAO tenure declining over time? If so, why? What factors are influencing these transitions? Why are some Alberta municipalities struggling to recruit and retain top talent into what should be the peak professional post for the thousands of municipal public administrators in the province? Most importantly, what are the implications for local government in Alberta?

## RESEARCH QUESTION AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

This paper<sup>1</sup> aims to identify patterns emerging with respect to the role and tenure of municipal CAOs in Alberta, and the implications for Alberta's municipalities. Using a mixed-methods approach that blends qualitative and quantitative analysis, the paper presents a descriptive analysis of trends and perceptions about the CAO role in Alberta.

The motivation for the study has a broader scope: to understand the current realities facing local government leaders in Alberta. The challenges facing local government, from mounting fiscal pressures to rising public expectations, are widely recognized. Alberta has an established process<sup>2</sup> for examining the viability of a municipality, including consideration of governance, finances, infrastructure and services. Agrawal and Gretzinger (2023, 5-6) draw from a broad literature to define viability for local governments in Alberta:

Viability is a condition that exists when a critical mass of people, and other antecedents such as human capital and social and hard infrastructure, are present to catalyze development; in turn, this enables the continuity of local government. Local governments are viable when they can provide the desired local services to a population.

Agrawal and Gretzinger (2023) identify human capital as a core ingredient in the viability of municipalities and their ability to provide services to residents. For the purposes of this paper, administrative viability — expressed in municipalities' capacity to attract and retain the needed talent to oversee municipal services — is understood to be a necessary component in the viability of local governments in Alberta. Examining patterns, trends and perceptions impacting the role of the municipal CAO is an important exercise.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been prepared for the Future of Municipal Governance Series, produced in co-operation between Alberta Municipalities and the University of Calgary School of Public Policy. The authors acknowledge with gratitude the leadership of both organizations in their effort to produce professionally relevant academic research on topics related to municipal government, which is an important and needed contribution in Canada.

<sup>2</sup> See: Viability Reviews for Alberta Municipalities, <https://www.alberta.ca/viability-reviews-for-municipalities.aspx>.

The paper proceeds in five sections. Part I establishes a context about municipal CAOs and the unique dynamics of the role in Canada. Part II provides a deeper dive into trends in Alberta's municipalities, drawing largely on provincial government data about CAOs over two decades, augmented with insights from municipal recruiters who have been engaged in CAO departures<sup>3</sup> during this period. Part III deepens the analysis with quantitative and qualitative insights from those who know the CAO experience best: current CAOs, based on 179 responses to a survey administered to all current CAOs in the province. Part IV presents experiences and lessons gleaned through interviews with past CAOs. Part V returns to the research question and offers broad conclusions about the evolution of the CAO role in Alberta and potential implications of the trends observed.

## **PART I: THE ROLE OF THE MUNICIPAL CAO**

In every Alberta municipality, residents elect a mayor and council with an expectation of providing a high quality of life and delivering vital services that residents rely on every day. Those mayors and councils then rely on a single individual to oversee the administration of all of these services: the municipal chief administrative officer (CAO).

The CAO role is of central significance in every Alberta municipality. The role varies widely depending on municipal context: in large municipalities, the CAO holds the ultimate responsibility for large administrations and budgets; in small municipalities, the CAO may be the only staff member (and sometimes in a part-time capacity or shared across municipalities). In all contexts, the CAO is paramount to the municipality's viability, the effective delivery of local public services and the well-being and quality of life enjoyed by residents.

### **ORIGINS**

The idea of an appointed professional officer to oversee the administration of local government is now well over a century old.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, the innovation was introduced in 1905 by a University of Chicago professor who urged the City of Chicago to provide for the selection of a municipal executive in the City's charter. The first appointment of such an executive occurred a few years later in 1908 in Staunton, Virginia. The motivation was simple: to introduce a professional, apolitical administrator to provide technical expertise in the rapidly expanding enterprise of local government:

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<sup>3</sup> This paper intentionally uses the term "departures" to describe the end of a CAO's tenure. Departures occur for a variety of reasons: retirement, leaving for another role, being dismissed due to poor fit, resignations for a variety of reasons and more. The reason for the end of a CAO's tenure is often a bit unclear, and even when publicly described as a "retirement" or "leaving for a new opportunity," there can be other important factors left unstated. The dataset used in this paper includes a large number of CAO departures and does not include the reason for the departure (stated or otherwise). To avoid connotations that can be associated with a CAO leaving their role, the authors use the term "departure" and sometimes "transition" as neutral descriptions.

<sup>4</sup> The 1934 text, *The City Manager Profession*, provides an excellent historical account of the development of the city manager profession in the United States, written by the director (Clarence E. Ridley) and assistant director (Orin Notling) of the International City Managers' Association. The book reads as a how-to guide for establishing the city manager role, including the rationale for introducing such a position (as captured in the introductory quote of this paper), qualifications and training, the professional code of ethics and more. The book's dedication reads: "To those city managers who are striving to raise the art and science of public administration to the high level it merits."

The causes of rapid growth of municipal activities are interwoven with the economic and social changes of recent times. Higher standards of living created higher demands for public activities [...] and these new activities called for a bewildering array of positions. Modern city government thus became a great business enterprise calling for administrative ability and leadership of a high order, and a greater variety of skilled and technical workers than is found in any private enterprise of similar size (Ridley and Notling 1934, 3-4).

Contemporaries dubbed it a “technological revolution, replacing amateur by the technician [...] representing a radical change in American notions of local government” (Brownlow 1934). The professional, apolitical nature of the role was viewed as an essential antidote for political interference and partisan agendas, particularly in communities dominated by well-established political machines (Ridley and Notling 1934). By the 1930s, the role was well established, particularly in larger American municipalities, with growing popularity north of the border.

## CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE

In Canadian municipalities, the CAO role (and the council-manager system) is now well established. It is enshrined in provincial legislation across jurisdictions, present in municipalities of all scale and type and organized into an array of national and provincial or territorial professional associations and networks. The role has also been subject to a higher level of study over the past few decades: seminal works about the CAO role in Canada (Plunket 1992; Siegel 2010, 2015); examinations of trends and evolutions in the role (Siegel 2011; O’Flynn and Mau 2014; Fenn and Siegel 2017); various graduate research projects about the CAO role (Long 2019; McIntosh 2009; O’Flynn 2011; Tremblay 2018) and more recently, annual surveys of current CAOs and their priorities (StrategyCorp 2022).

An overarching theme across this work is how highly varied the CAO role is across Canada, depending on the municipality’s location and size. Serving as CAO in a small village is a dramatically different role than that in a large urban municipality such as the City of Calgary or the City of Edmonton. In the former, the CAO must wear many hats with direct operational involvement in most or all municipal services; in the latter, the incumbent oversees a workforce of thousands and billion-dollar budgets.

Another important variation is in the role’s legal definition, where it is significantly more protected and privileged in some provinces compared to others. For example, Nova Scotia’s *Municipal Government Act* (2022) provides that no member of council or any committee can communicate with or give direction to members of administration other than through the CAO. Under Newfoundland and Labrador’s *Municipalities Act*, the dismissal of a CAO requires two successive two-thirds votes on council at least 30 days apart, with written notice provided to the CAO in advance of both votes. Most recently, the Ontario government introduced strong-mayor powers in Toronto and Ottawa, empowering the mayor with unilateral decision-making authority about hiring, firing and directing the city manager (among other senior positions), directing the organizational structure and other sweeping powers.

Differences aside, what unifies CAOs is the unique position of their role within the array of important actors in a municipality. Siegel (2011, 2015) has popularized the conception of the CAO role as including three distinct leadership relationships:

- **Leading up** to the mayor and council, which includes providing strategic and policy advice, being accountable for the execution of council's direction and the administration of services, and serving as the critical link between the political and administrative bodies of a municipality;
- **Leading down** to the organization by managing the administrative team, including overseeing the administration of all services and being responsible for how resources (financial, human and otherwise) are deployed to do so; and
- **Leading out** to a broad array of individuals and groups in the community, including being a key figure for community members who seek to engage with the local government on a wide array of topics.

In practical terms, these leadership roles look quite different from one another — a theme which this paper returns to in Part III — and require CAOs to hold a wide range of skills and abilities and a knowledge base that spans the increasing scope of municipal services. It is a demanding, complex role. In the words of a municipal recruiter interviewed for this project (and someone who has completed more than 70 CAO recruitments):

Honestly, it's probably one of the hardest executive roles that exists, I think, especially compared to private sector roles. The level of citizen engagement, the huge range of stakeholders you're dealing with, that there are so many lines of business that you have to know — and the level of expectation these days, you know? As a society, we're just not willing to allow for anything to go wrong anymore ... and when it does, we tweet about it instantly and how mad we are. So expectations are very high, but then people don't want to pay for it. Nobody wants their taxes touched. So it's an environment of constant pressure — and it's a pressure that I don't believe everybody appreciates.<sup>5</sup>

The role of a municipal CAO in Canada is rooted in an important idea: that the complexity and importance of local government warrants professional, apolitical and competent administrative leadership. The role varies widely depending on provincial or territorial context, the size and scope of the municipality and other factors.

CAOs hold challenging positions involving multiple concurrent leadership roles: with council, with the community and with administration. Many important changes are occurring in the broader environment which inevitably influence the experiences of CAOs and the work they do.

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<sup>5</sup> Confidential interview. More insights from recruiter interviews can be found in Part II of this paper.

## PART II: TRENDS IN ALBERTA MUNICIPALITIES

What do we know about the role of municipal CAO specific to Alberta? How has the role changed over time? This section draws on two primary data sources: first, records which the Alberta government has maintained and shared about changes in municipal CAOs over almost two decades (2003–2022)<sup>6</sup>; and second, insights from municipal recruiters who have been engaged in CAO transitions during this time.

The discussion focuses on three specific trends:

1. Changes to CAO tenure over time, as well as patterns that emerge when examining tenure across municipalities of different sizes;
2. Frequency of CAO transitions over time; and
3. Timing of CAO transitions, with a particular focus on council terms.

### TRENDS IN CAO TENURE

The Alberta government’s dataset on changes in senior roles offers many important insights about patterns in the role of CAOs, including an opportunity to examine how CAO tenure has changed.

Over the past two decades, the average CAO tenure in an Alberta municipality has been just under two years (724 days) and the median tenure has been just over one year (379 days).<sup>7</sup> When those with “interim” or “acting” in their titles are removed from the dataset, the average CAO tenure increases to two years and four months (870 days) and the median increases to one year and eight months (612 days).

Median and average CAO tenure varies depending on the type of municipality. The longest median tenure, three years, is in cities, which is 60 per cent longer than the median tenure in towns, 65 per cent longer than the median tenure in municipal districts and 130 per cent longer than in villages. CAOs in both summer villages and specialized municipalities have median tenures of two years or slightly longer.

Municipality Type	CAO Tenure in Years (Days)		
	Median	Average	Number of Observations
City	3 years (1,093)	2.9 years (1,054)	53
Municipal District	1.9 years (704)	2.8 years (1,002)	150
Town	1.9 years (681)	2.4 years (871)	324
Village	1.3 years (476)	2 years (728)	277
Summer Village	2 years (730)	2.7 years (987)	102
Specialized Municipality	1.8 years (660)	2.4 years (868)	31
Improvement District	1.1 years (413)	2 years (725)	17

<sup>6</sup> The dataset includes 2,052 roles and covers changes in CAO roles spanning the period from March 14, 2003 to Nov. 28, 2022. Although the earliest start date recorded is May 17, 1995, CAO roles that ended before the electronic system of recording role changes started in 2003 are not recorded, so we focus our analysis on roles with start dates in 2003 or later. Each role has a start date (effective date) and an end date (expiry date) unless it had not ended by Nov. 28, 2022. Acting and interim CAOs are imputed based on the work title field. Gender of CAOs is imputed from the title field.

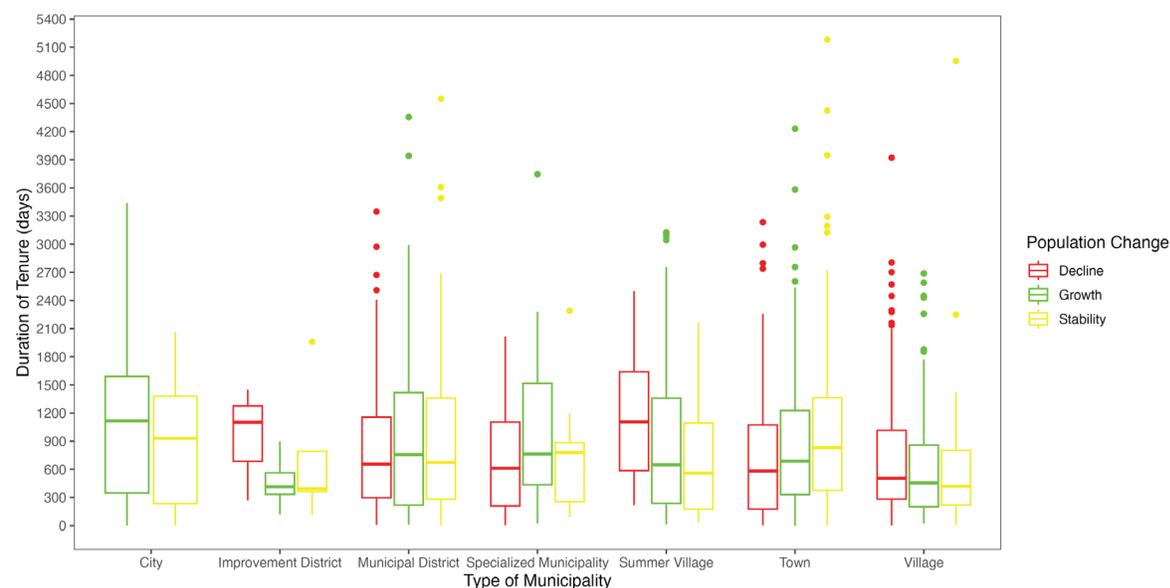
<sup>7</sup> Calculated by taking the mean and median duration of tenure for CAOs with start dates and end dates between Jan. 1, 2003 and Nov. 28, 2022 (n = 954 for permanent, n = 155 for acting and n = 327 for interim).

Municipality type can mask significant variations in terms of population (Calgary and Edmonton are much larger than Wetaskiwin, the smallest city) and population patterns change. Using the categories of growth, stability or decline developed by McQuillan and Lazlo (2022),<sup>8</sup> shows how CAO tenure varies by the recent rate of population change. Stable municipalities have the highest average CAO tenure at 2.6 years, followed by growth municipalities at 2.5 years and decline municipalities at 2.2 years.

Population Change (2016–2021)	CAO Tenure in Years (Days)		
	Median	Average	Number of Observations
Growth	1.8 years (642)	2.5 years (904)	347
Stability	1.9 years (690)	2.6 years (936)	224
Decline	1.6 years (582)	2.2 years (794)	375

Separating CAO tenure by municipality type and recent population change illustrates even more variation. The box plots show the range of variation in duration of CAO tenure for each combination of municipality type and recent population change.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 1: Length of Tenure of CAO by Type of Municipality and Rate of Population Change**



Source: Calculated from Ministry of Municipal Affairs CAO changes file, complete tenures only, 2003-2022

<sup>8</sup> In McQuillan and Lazlo (2022), these categories were based on population change between 2011 and 2021 of growth (more than five per cent), stability (between minus five per cent and five per cent) and decline (less than minus five per cent). The measures in this paper are based on population change between 2016 and 2021 and the respective thresholds have therefore been reduced by half.

<sup>9</sup> The box outlines the interquartile range, within which 50 per cent of all observations fall. The whiskers (upper and lower) indicate the range of observations that are within 1.5 times the interquartile range and the dots indicate outliers that are more than 1.5 times the interquartile range.

As this diagram illustrates, the patterns are not uniform across types of municipalities in Alberta. More specifically:

- **Cities:** The interquartile range (the box) is larger for growth cities, as is the upper whisker and the median. CAOs in growth cities are serving longer (~3.25 years) than their counterparts in cities with more stable populations (~2.5 years).
- **Improvement Districts:** CAOs in improvement districts with recent population decline are serving much longer tenures than their counterparts in growth or stable improvement districts, where the median tenure is just over one year.
- **Municipal Districts:** Unlike cities and improvement districts, there are outlier observations of relatively long CAO tenures in this type of municipality for all categories of population change. There is not much variation between municipal districts, however.
- **Specialized Municipalities:** The distribution of CAO tenure is quite similar to that of municipal districts, but there are fewer outlier (long-serving CAO) observations.
- **Summer Villages:** There is a substantial difference between summer villages experiencing decline and those experiencing growth or stability. Median CAO tenure in decline summer villages is the highest of all the municipality types, even though there are no very long-serving CAOs (more than seven years).
- **Towns:** There is substantial variation among towns, with the lowest median CAO tenure in towns experiencing decline and the highest median CAO tenure in stable towns. The height of the upper whiskers and the number of outlier observations show that there are quite a few longer serving CAOs pulling up the average tenure for these places.
- **Villages:** The variation in towns is in the opposite direction, with those experiencing decline having the highest median CAO tenure and those experiencing more stability in population with the lowest median CAO tenure. As in the case of towns and municipal districts, there are outlier observations at the high end of tenure, but the interquartile range is smaller, showing that there is less variation overall in the tenure of CAOs in these places.

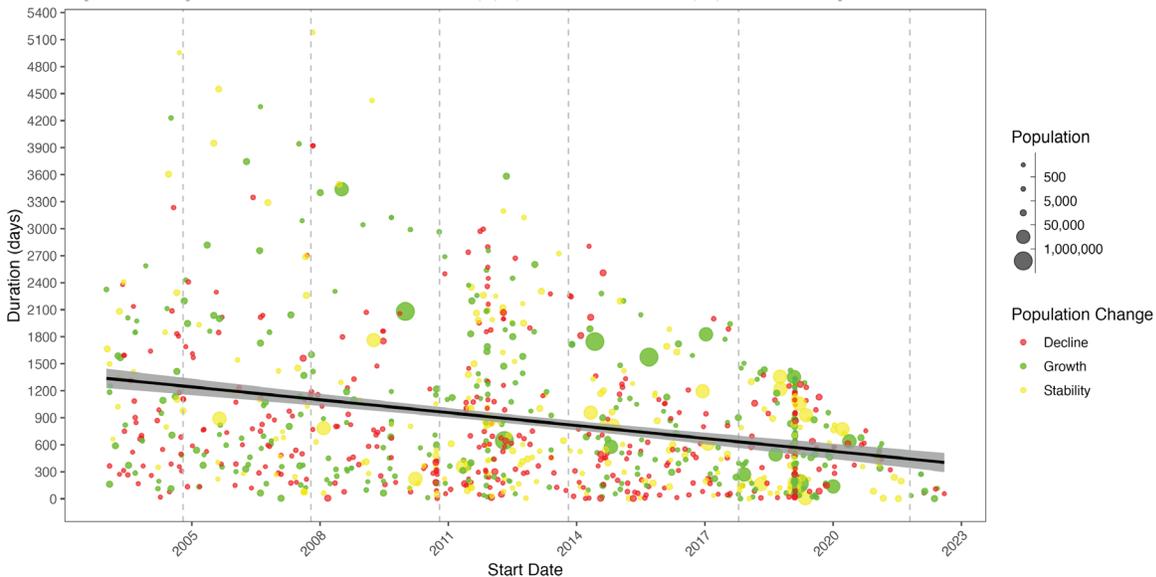
## VARIATION OVER TIME

What changes can be observed when CAO tenure is examined over time? The following diagram plots the duration of CAO tenure against the start date to show the change in CAO tenure over time. Some caution is advised in comparing CAO tenure over time. For the more recent time periods (the three most recent council terms), the proportion of CAO tenures that are ongoing ranges from 11 per cent to 86 per cent.<sup>10</sup> Only complete CAO tenures are included in the analysis that follows, so any CAO who is currently serving is not represented on the plots. This lowers the average and median durations for those more recent time periods. Appendix A provides more detail on the nuances of comparing CAO tenure over time.

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<sup>10</sup> Twenty-three of 209 (11 per cent) for CAOs who started in 2013–2017, 219 of 459 (47 per cent) for CAOs who started in 2017–2021 and 63 of 73 (86 per cent) for CAOs who started after the 2021 election.

**Figure 2: Length of Tenure of CAO Over Time, by Population and Rate of Population Change**



Source: Calculated from Ministry of Municipal Affairs CAO changes file, 2003-2022

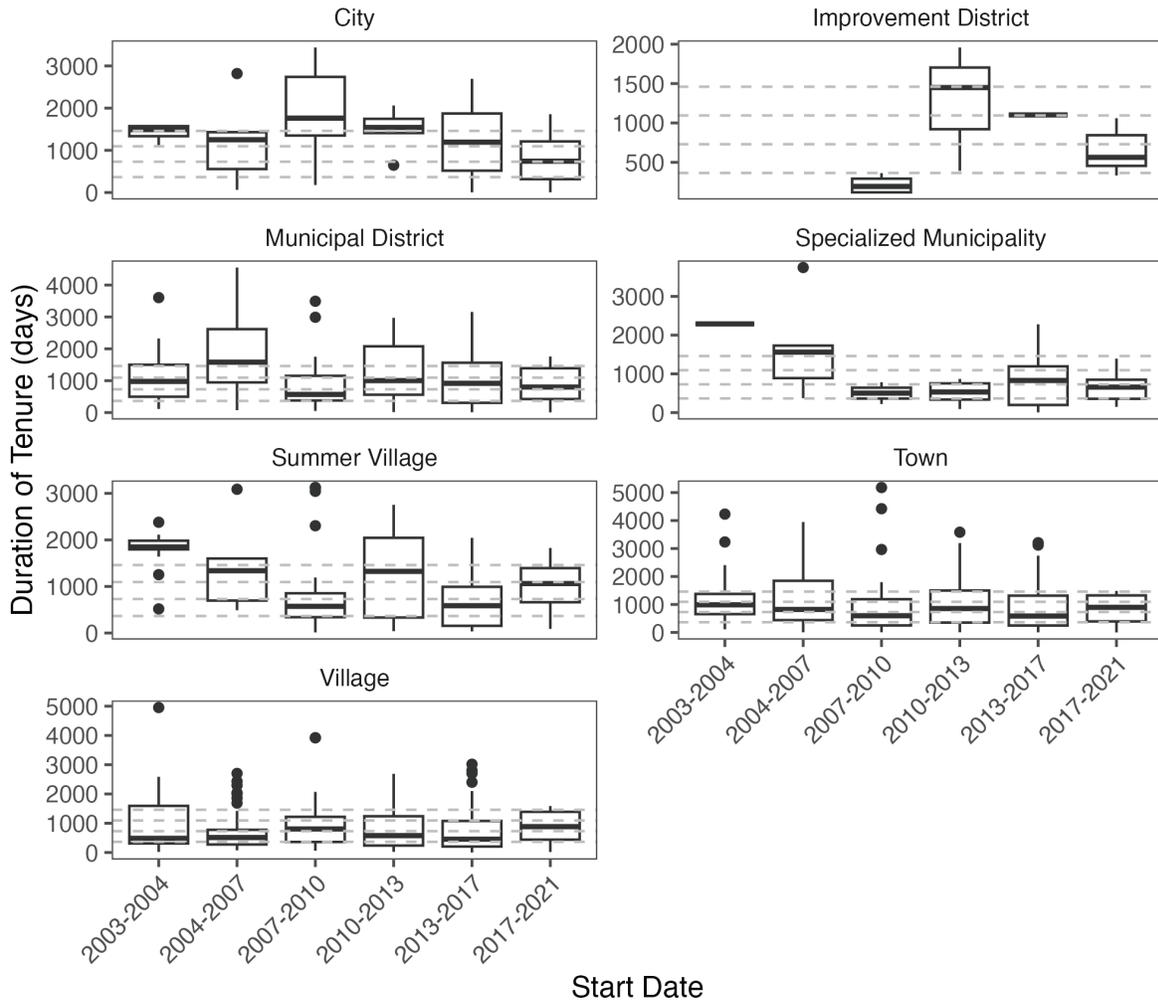
The black line, a simple linear regression of start date against duration, shows the line of best fit through the observations and demonstrates that duration of CAO tenure has declined over the past two decades.<sup>11</sup>

Using the election dates, represented by the grey dashed vertical lines, we can divide the overall period into seven full or partial council terms. Across most municipality types, duration of CAO tenure has declined.<sup>12</sup> The variation in tenure between CAOs who started in the same time periods for the same types of municipalities has also declined; there are fewer long-serving outliers and generally more compact boxes. Almost half of CAOs in cities who started sometime in 2013–2017 and ended by Nov. 28, 2022, served less than three years (council term of four years).

<sup>11</sup> Note: This is not an artifact of start dates closer to Nov. 28, 2022 having a lower maximum value than start dates further in the past, as only tenures that were completed by Nov. 28 are plotted.

<sup>12</sup> CAOs who started after the 2021 election are not included in this plot. To make comparisons between the more recent time periods (2017–2021 and 2013–2017) and the earlier time periods more accurate, CAOs whose tenure was ongoing as of Nov. 28, 2022 are included in this plot and recorded as having a duration that ended on Dec. 2, 2022 (the end of the week of Nov. 28, 2022). Excluding these CAOs from the plot has the general effect of lowering the boxplots for those two time periods. See Appendix A for more detail on comparing CAO tenure over time.

**Figure 3: Length of Tenure of CAO by Type of Municipality and Start**



Source: Calculated from Ministry of Municipal Affairs CAO changes file, complete tenures only, 2003-2022

This is quite different from the tenure of city CAOs hired in 2007–2010, more than 75 per cent of whom served longer than one council term (at that time, three years). The same trend is apparent in municipal districts, where just over half of CAOs hired in 2004–2007 served more than four years. In 2013–2017, almost three-quarters of CAOs who completed their tenures in municipal districts served less than four years. Generally, it appears that the length of a single council term is becoming a harder cap on the tenure of the vast majority of CAOs in Alberta, regardless of municipality type.

## Percentage of CAO Tenures Longer than Three or Four Years

Start Date	% of CAO Tenures		
	Less Than 3 Years	Between 3 and 4 Years	More Than 4 Years
Pre-2003	9.3%	1.9%	88.8%
2003-2004	51.2%	12.2%	36.6%
2004-2007	63.4%	8.9%	27.6%
2007-2010	70.6%	10.3%	19.1%
2010-2013	60.3%	10.3%	29.4%
2013-2017	67.9%	8.6%	11% ongoing 12.4% complete
2017-2021	17.6% ongoing 44.4% complete	26.8% ongoing 7.6% complete	3.3% ongoing 0.02% complete

## Gender of CAO

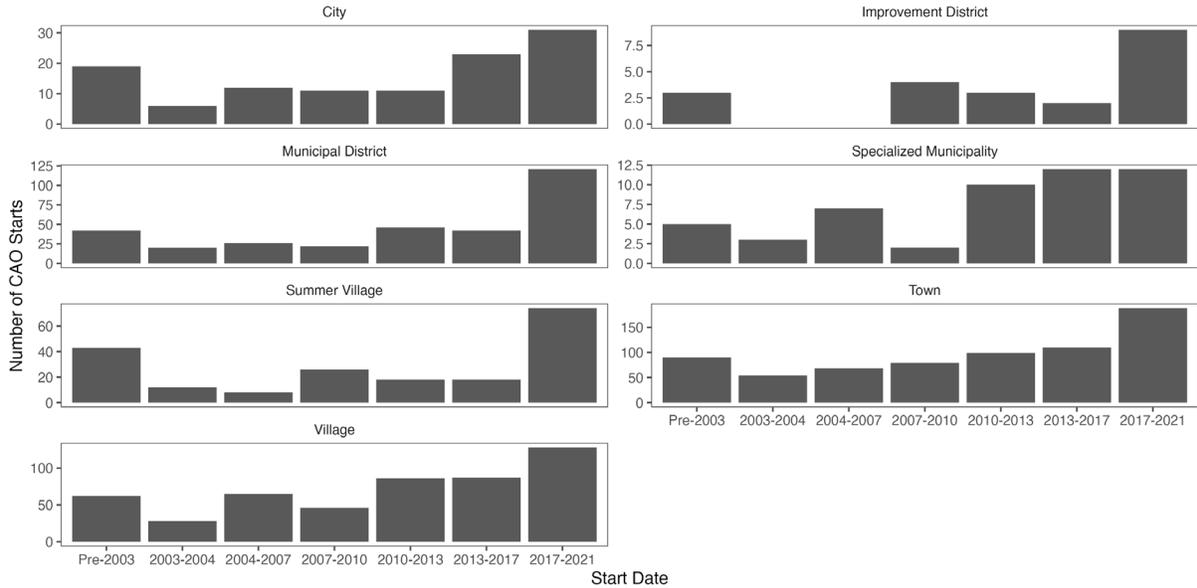
How does CAO tenure vary by gender? Although gender is not explicitly available in the dataset, the title variable (Mr./Ms.) is a reasonable proxy for gender. Overall, 936 (45.6 per cent) of the observations in the dataset with a recorded title are coded as female; 1,114 (54.3 per cent) are coded as male. Including all observations with an imputed gender, the average tenure of a female CAO is 3.1 years (1,138 days) and the median is 1.6 years (590 days). The average tenure of a male CAO is 3.2 years (1,153 days) and the median is 1.7 years (627 days).

These very similar averages and median values for tenure in the aggregate obscure some substantial differences in roles and population size. In terms of population, the average population (in 2021) for municipalities with a female CAO is 5,464; for male CAOs, the average population is 19,348. In terms of CAO roles, women take on the majority of acting (60 per cent) and interim (50 per cent) CAO roles. Comparing just the permanent CAO roles, the average tenure for female permanent CAOs is 3.7 years (1,362 days) and the median is 2.6 years (954 days); the average for male permanent CAOs is 3.7 years (1,356 days) and the median is 2.4 years (890 days).

## FREQUENCY OF CAO TRANSITIONS

Shorter tenures for permanent CAOs mean more frequent transitions between CAOs, including acting and temporary CAOs. In every type of municipality, the overall number of CAO starts, including all three kinds — acting, interim and permanent — has increased significantly. In cities and towns, the rate has tripled; in villages, it has doubled; in summer villages, it is almost five times higher.

**Figure 4: Number of CAO Starts by Type of Municipality**



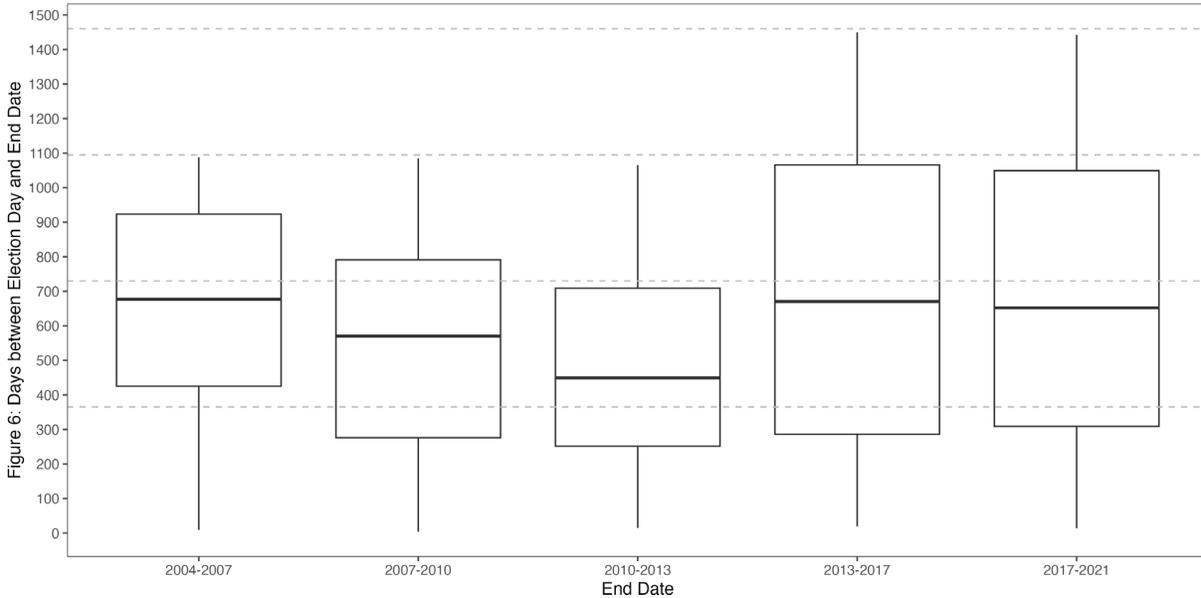
Source: Calculated from Ministry of Municipal Affairs CAO changes file, complete tenures only, 2003-2022



## TIMING OF CAO TRANSITIONS

In the words of one recruiter: “A CAO’s lifespan is typically the period of one council” with a general sense that most of these transition points take place shortly after a municipal election. But is this pattern reflected in the data on actual timing of CAO transitions?

**Figure 6: Days between End of CAO’s Tenure and Most Recent Election Day**

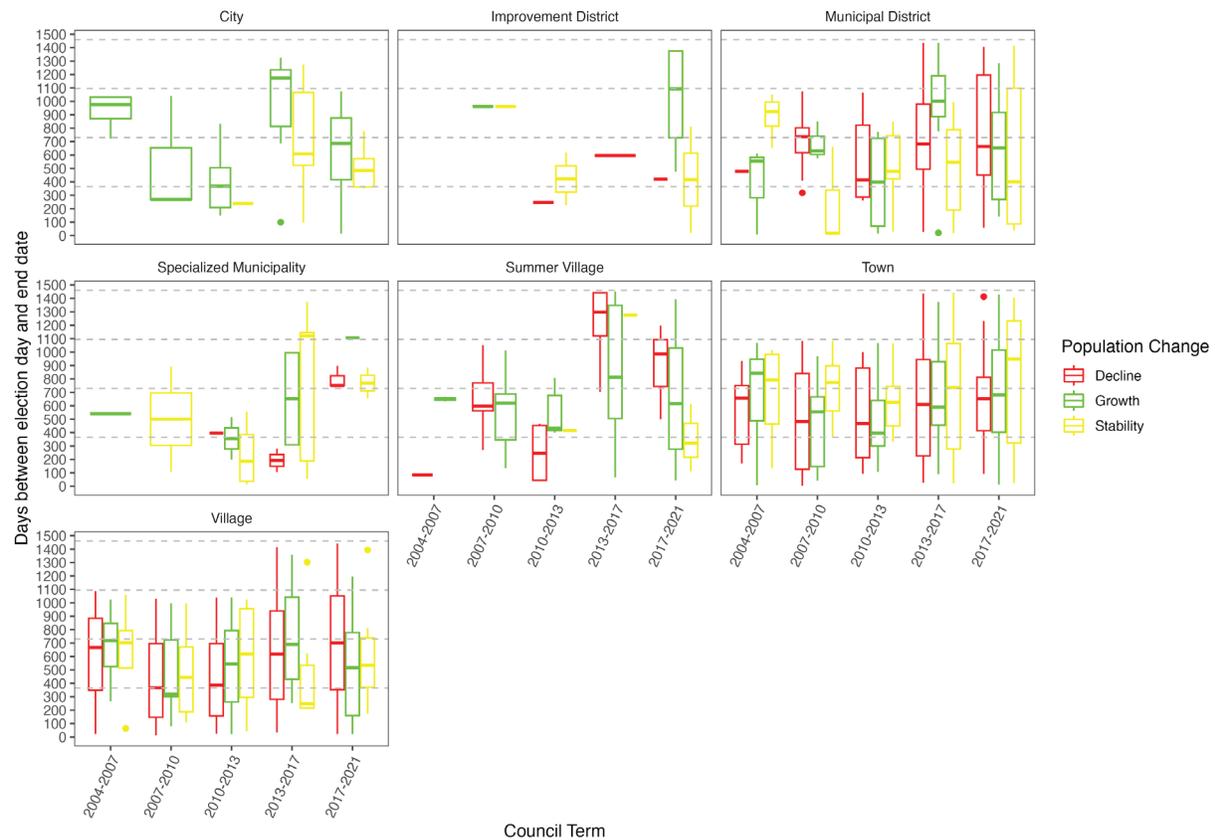


Source: Calculated from Ministry of Municipal Affairs CAO changes file, complete tenures only, 2003-2022

Measuring the time between the most recent election and the end of a CAO’s tenure provides a way to explore this question. In most time periods, more than one-quarter of the CAO tenures that end during that council term do so within one year of the election; more than half of CAO tenures that end in the term do so within two years. If the recruiter’s insight holds, then the number of days between the most recent election and the end date for CAOs would be decreasing. This was the trend between 2004-2007 and 2010-2013, in which time the median number of days decreased from just under two years to less than a year and a half (along with the interquartile range).

However, analyzing all completed tenures of permanent CAOs, the median number of days between the most recent election and the end of tenure has increased since the lows of 2010-2013. This counterintuitive finding, however, should be considered in context. In particular, the council terms were lengthened from three to four years in those two time periods. Furthermore, a CAO’s tenure ends for different reasons – some are voluntary retirements, some are for personal or health reasons and some are involuntary. It may be that involuntary departures are concentrated near the beginning of council terms and voluntary departures tend to occur later. Without knowing the reason for each departure, it is difficult to authoritatively test the hypothesis.

**Figure 7: Days between End of CAO's Tenure and Most Recent Election Day by Type of Municipality and Rate of Population**



Source: Calculated from Ministry of Municipal Affairs CAO changes file, complete tenures only, 2003-2022

Looking at the change over time by municipality type and recent population change is also illuminating, as the aggregate trends do not apply to all types of municipalities. In cities, there is a strong recent downward trend within different rates of population change. In both growth and stable cities, there is a strong downward trend from 2013–2017 to 2017–2021. In towns, the median number of days since the election in both growth and decline municipalities is lower than it is for stable towns, suggesting perhaps that relatively more change (whether growth or decline) may be leading to more rapid transitions than in towns with stable populations.

What explains these trends? When asked about patterns they are observing, experienced municipal recruiters<sup>13</sup> offered many interesting theories. One recruiter diagnosed the problem as involving multiple factors including economic conditions, geography and political dynamics:

A lot of people have left Alberta. The dynamic in politics at the provincial level has hit municipalities very hard: downloading without any financial backing for that downloading; mismanagement in some of the departments that touch municipalities. [...] Also, the economy, especially places where the economy is totally reliant on oil and gas. It's a long winter, and the politics is loosey-

<sup>13</sup> Confidential interviews were conducted with three municipal recruiters. Collectively, this group has more than 40 years of recruitment experience in the municipal sector and has overseen almost 200 CAO recruitments.

goosey at best. So there are lots of issues that weigh on people [being recruited or leaving CAO] because people do their homework, you know?

People think in Alberta because of the tax system it's a destination; they will get ahead financially with less taxes and a competitive salary — but then with the work conditions, people don't stay. And a lot of that has to do with internal politics. [...] The CAO's role is as the day-to-day manager of the organization, and Council don't get involved or talk to staff about who to hire or what projects they find more attractive — well, those are supposed to be “no-go zones” [but] it happens regularly.

Another recruiter stated that the heightened struggle to recruit and retain talent in small municipalities may be related to the community dynamics:

Whenever I'm in a small community, I'll be in Chambers and people walk in and it's, oh hey? How's it going? They know each other; they grew up together. So there's a level of familiarity — it's kind of like going home, right? When you're with your family, you're not always as polite as you are out in the world. I think there's a level of intimacy that can get hard. It gives people a bit too much latitude to go after each other. There's only so much that people take, right? So at some point in time, they leave.

The municipality's characteristics can also be an important consideration in both decisions to join and to depart. This includes fiscal health, the council's orientation about the future and the community's location and quality-of-life features which may be important to the candidate and their family:

If they've been in municipal government for a long time and they appreciate the sector, they're probably looking for an opportunity where they see a progressive council or a council that has bold ideas, that wants to be innovative, that's willing to make changes. They are probably also looking for a well-funded community, not so hand-to-mouth so they can do things that are innovative and different. I think revenue generation is on everyone's minds because people are concerned about how municipalities are currently funded and how that may change. So, having the foresight to think through all of that — and then being in an environment where there is what they want for a good quality of life for their family. What is there for my family? That is a question we get asked a lot. My husband does this, my wife does that, my partner does this, what's available to them? My kids are really involved in sports, what's there for them? Those are the kind of things they are asking about.

## **OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The data largely confirm the anecdotal sense that the length of CAO tenure is in decline and has been for several years. In all types of municipalities, the average tenure is less than one term of council. CAO tenure tends to be shorter outside of cities and in communities of all types experiencing a recent decline in population.

The tenure of female CAOs is slightly longer than that of their male counterparts and they take on the majority of acting and interim CAO roles. Male CAOs tend to serve in communities with larger populations (more than three times higher).

The days of long-serving CAOs outside of cities appear to be waning, as the length of one council term becomes a harder cap on CAO tenure in those communities. The number of CAO transitions, including acting and interim roles, has been increasing in all types of municipalities — in some types of municipalities, double or triple the rate of CAO transitions in earlier times.

Recruiters who are intimately engaged in CAO entrances and exits cite several underlying factors for declining tenure: economic conditions, community characteristics and political dynamics. Obviously, the cause of the transition (retirement vs a termination) is an important detail, but the dataset used for this analysis does not provide those details. Further research is warranted to better understand these patterns.

## **PART III: INSIGHTS FROM CAOS**

No group is better positioned to share insights about the contemporary practice and experience of municipal CAOs than CAOs themselves. A survey was distributed in early 2023 to all current CAOs in Alberta, using contact information in the Alberta government's open-data directory. A total of 179 responses were received from current CAOs, representing a distribution across municipal population size<sup>14</sup> and length of tenure in the role.<sup>15</sup> About one-third of the CAOs who responded served as a CAO in another municipality prior to taking on their current role; about half had served in another municipal role (excluding CAO) before taking on their current CAO role.<sup>16</sup>

### **TRANSITION DECISIONS**

CAOs were asked what factors were most important to them when considering taking on their current role as a CAO. Which factor emerged at the top of the list? The top three in order of importance are: (1) dynamics with council; (2) desirability of living in the community; and (3) dynamics with administration.

Figure 8 presents all nine factors included in the survey, ordered from most to least important and showing the distribution for each.

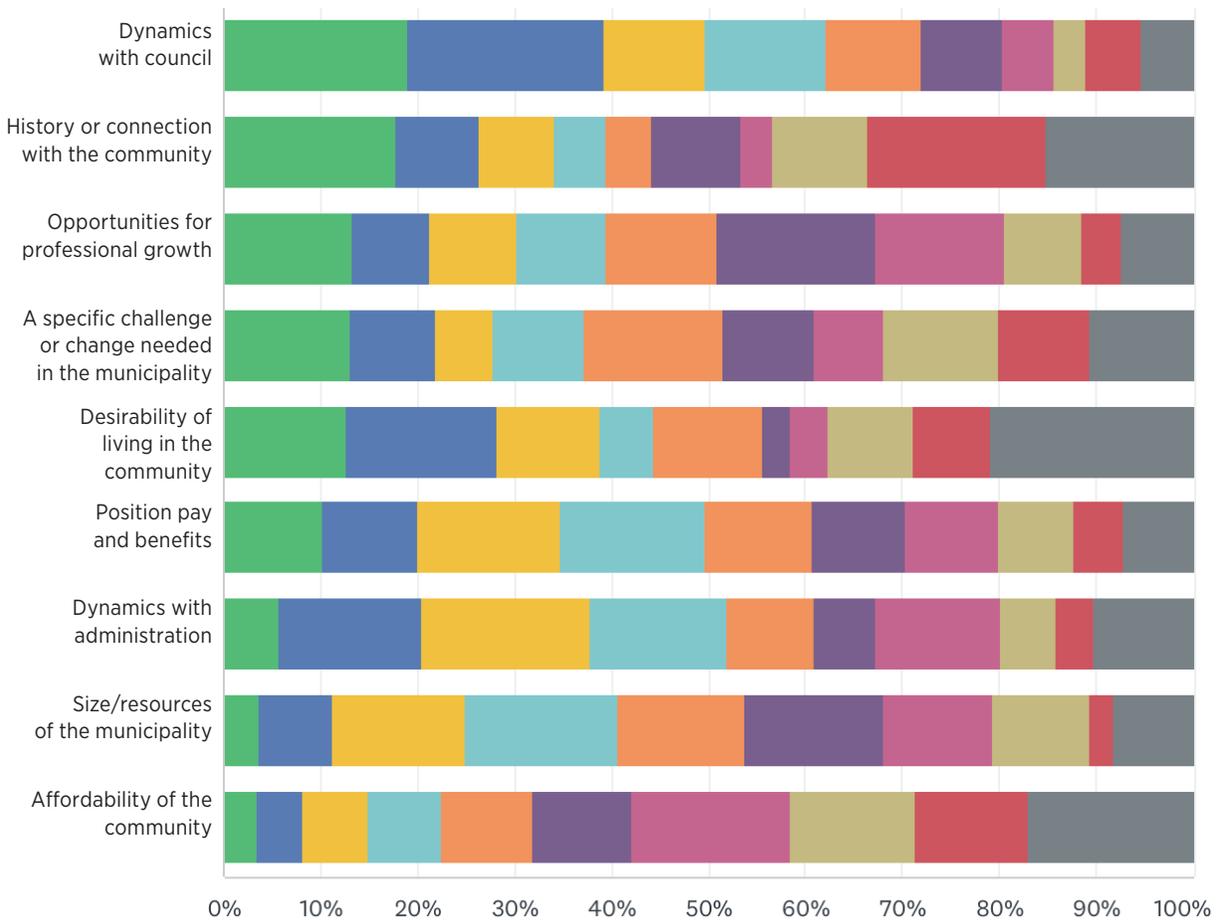
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<sup>14</sup> Of the 179 current CAOs who responded to the survey, 37 (20.8 per cent) serve municipalities with a population of fewer than 500 people; 25 (14 per cent) serve municipalities with 501-1,000 people; 55 (30.1 per cent) serve municipalities with 1,001-5,000 people; 39 (21.9 per cent) serve municipalities with 5,001-15,000 people; 16 (nine per cent) serve municipalities with 15,001-50,000 people; and, 6 (3.4 per cent) serve municipalities with 50,001 people or more.

<sup>15</sup> Of the 179 current CAOs who responded to the survey, 56 (31.3 per cent) have served in the role for less than two years; 44 (24.6 per cent) have served in the role for two to five years; 43 (24 per cent) have served in the role for five to 10 years; and 36 (20.1 per cent) have served in the role for more than 10 years.

<sup>16</sup> When asked about their immediately previous role, 179 CAOs responded as follows: 54 (30.2 per cent) served as a municipal CAO; 87 (48.6 per cent) served as municipal staff, excluding CAO; five (2.8 per cent) served in another public sector role, excluding municipal; 14 (7.8 per cent) served in a private sector role; four (2.2 per cent) served in a non-profit sector role and 15 (8.4 per cent) served in another role (five of whom indicated in the open text that their previous role was as mayor in their own or another municipality).

**Figure 8: Most Important Factors to Consider When Taking on a CAO Job**



Respondents were asked why they left their previous role. Not surprisingly, for those who indicated that their most recent position was a non-CAO role, the most common response was a desire to be promoted to CAO:

- “I had ten years left and becoming a CAO was a natural progression in my career.”
- “There was no reliable CAO in the role for three years. The CAO role was filled with temporary or arms-length leadership that limited my ability, and the rest of the staff’s ability, to efficiently do our work.”
- “I wanted the challenge of the CAO role before I retired.”

Other cited reasons included a desire to go to a larger municipality, moving for family and/or partner’s work progression or a desire to leave their previous organization.

For those who served as a CAO in their immediately previous role, the most common reason for leaving involved the political dynamics:

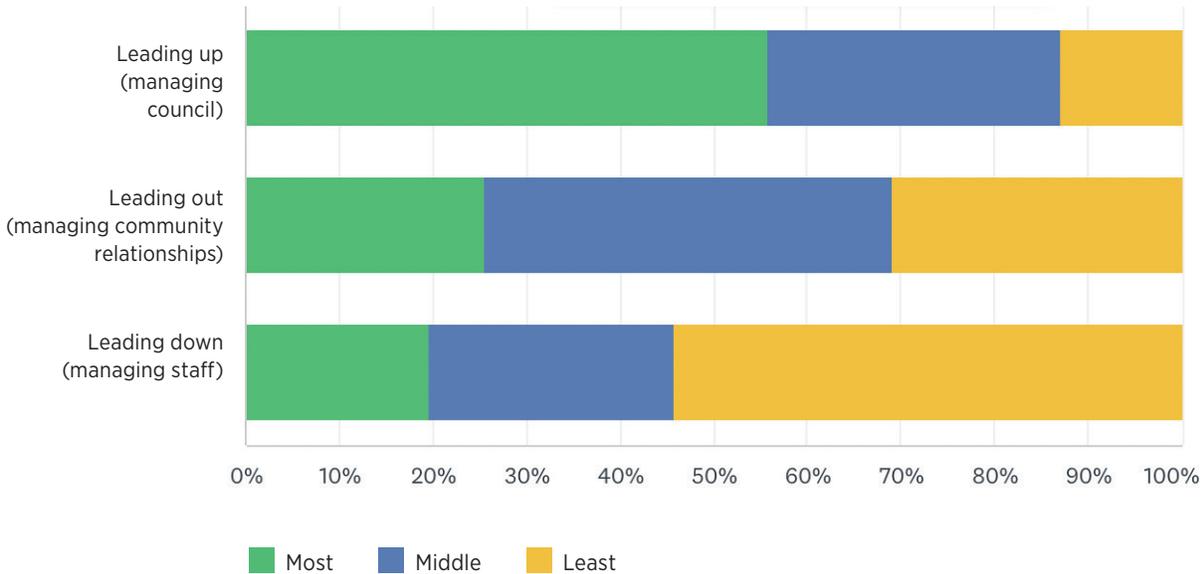
- “I left because the toxic environment with the mayor and council was affecting my health.”
- “I was terminated after the election due to turn over in politicians and being bullied by individuals in the community.”
- “Toxic council leadership and a deteriorating relationship between council and the CAO.”
- “New council was elected and in about a month decided to relieve me of my position.”
- “Rogue councillor personally attacking me that the rest of council wouldn’t deal with under the code of conduct bylaw.”

The second most common reason involved some personal preference (“I wanted to move to a more desirable location”) or family situation (“my spouse was retiring and looking for a different place to move”).

**EXPERIENCES ON THE JOB**

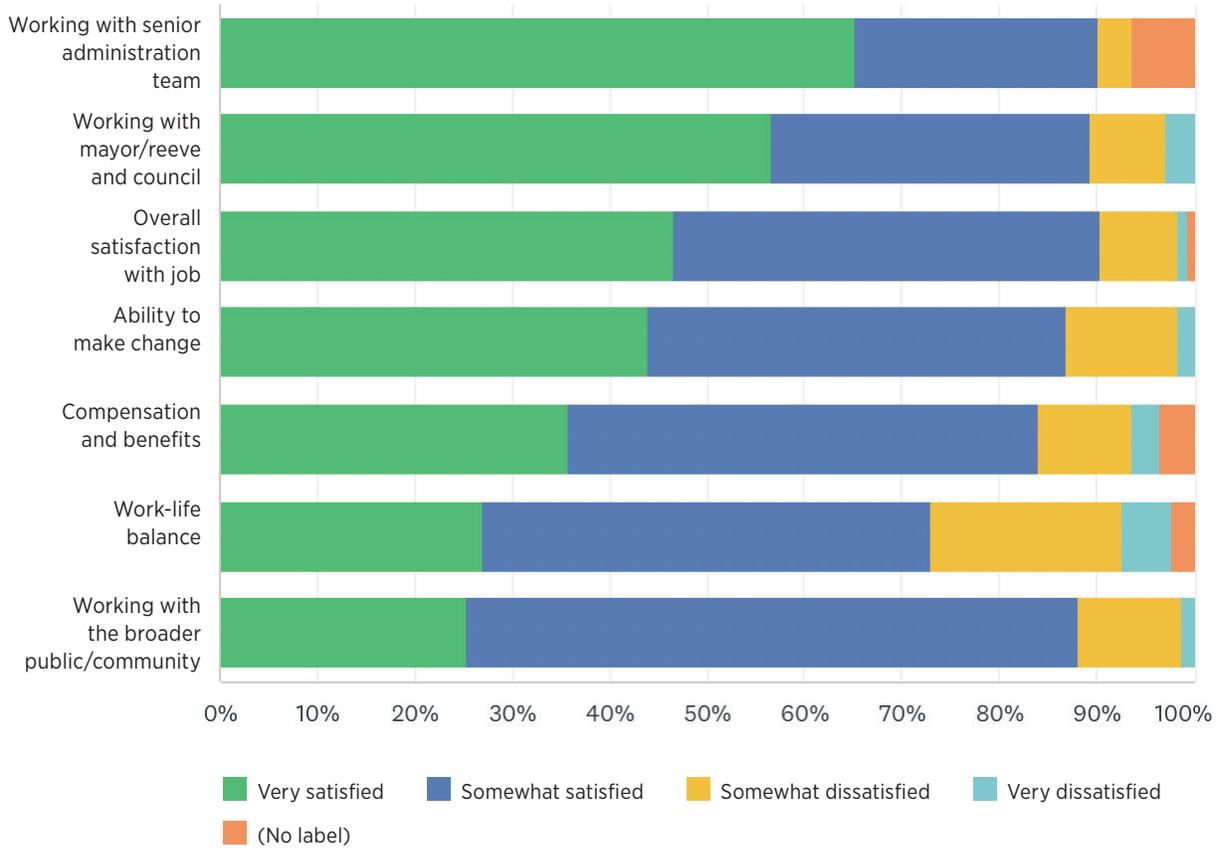
The next set of questions asked CAOs to describe their experiences in the job, beginning with which of the leadership roles – leading up, leading out and leading down – was the most challenging for them. The clear winner: leading up and working with council.

**Figure 9: Most Challenging Part of the CAO Job**



Despite the challenges of the role, CAOs overall reported fairly high levels of satisfaction with the dimensions of their job. The highest level of satisfaction reported involved working with the senior administration team. The highest dimension reported as “very dissatisfied” was work-life balance.

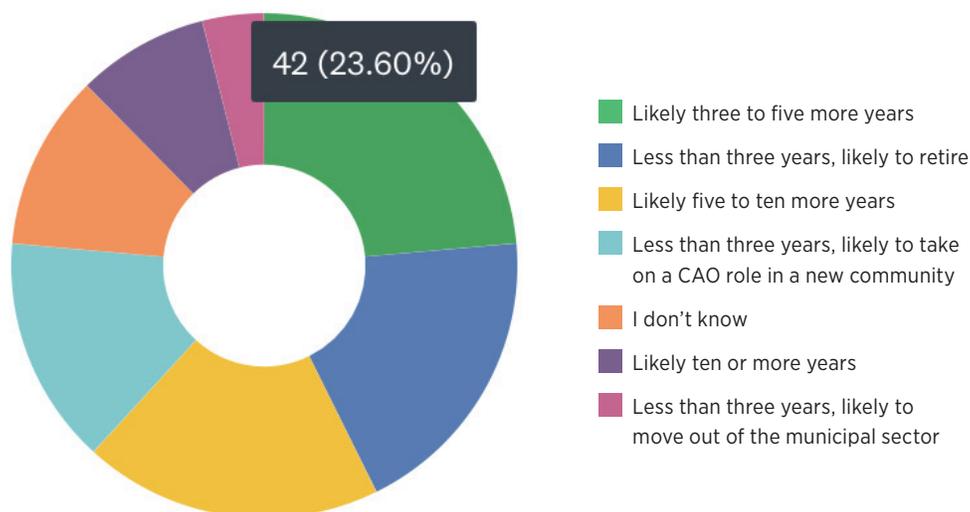
**Figure 10: Satisfaction with Dimensions of Current CAO Role**



When asked how long the CAO planned to remain in their current role, there was a wide distribution of responses. The most frequent response was to indicate an intention to leave in three to five years. The second most common response was less than three years, due to retirement.

One in seven indicated that they plan to leave within three years to become a CAO in a different municipality.

**Figure 11: Plans about Tenure in Current Role**



CAOs were asked: If you could change one thing about your current CAO role to increase your satisfaction with your job (and desire to stay in the job), what would it be? Perhaps not surprisingly, given earlier responses, the most common word used in responses was “council” (included in 25.6 per cent of responses):

- “The dynamics at council is concerning.”
- “Clarity in role definitions of council and management, and more vigilance in adherence to those roles.”
- “The communication chain with council needs to be better. I have no direction when they don’t respond.”
- “If council would be more respectful towards each other at council meetings, it would create less stress for administration.”
- “Having 9 bosses makes this the most challenging role of my career. They should speak with one voice, and they should be transparent with their concerns. Not always the case.”

Other commonly cited pressure points included the sheer volume of responsibilities, particularly in smaller communities:

- “More senior administration support. There are too many responsibilities that I am not capable of managing on my own.”
- “Wearing fewer hats — the smaller the community, the more roles the CAO has” and;
- A need for more consistent funding from other levels of government: “The job would be a lot easier if other levels of government supplied predictable funding.”

Another theme that emerged was the stresses inherent in the role, including level of responsibility, lack of work-life balance and the precariousness of the position around electoral cycles:

- “The fact that you are always on call and the feeling of responsibility for everything that happens in the municipality.”
- “Remove the politics from the CAO position. Our job is only guaranteed until the next election.”
- “More job security. The position of CAO is not well enough understood by the public and those running for council. There need to be some legislated protections for the CAO so people cannot run on the position of getting rid of the CAO.”
- “Not feeling as stressed about everything, always. More time off to decompress. Work-life balance.”

For some, higher compensation would increase satisfaction: “Pay, however small municipalities can’t afford to pay what the position is worth.”

Some respondents indicated overall satisfaction with the role and no need for change: “I am very happy here, no change needed,” while others felt the opposite: “There is too much that needs to change. I would not recommend this as a career option to anyone.”

## **FUTURE PLANS**

CAOs were asked about their future departure from the role and what they expected the situation would be for the municipality. Of all respondents, 41.8 per cent indicated that there would be qualified candidates outside the organization interested in the role and 35.6 per cent believed that members of their senior administration team would be interested in taking on the job. One in seven (13 per cent) has a succession plan in place with a successor already identified. One in six (16.4 per cent) believes it will be very difficult to identify a replacement.

## **OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

This sample of current CAOs offered many important insights about their experiences, their priorities and their thoughts on how to improve the CAO role. Three major themes emerged. First, the political dynamics is clearly a primary driver of CAO dissatisfaction and the chief consideration for CAOs when considering taking or departing from a CAO opportunity. Second, CAOs generally find working with their administration teams to be a positive part of the job. This was identified as the top driver of satisfaction and the least challenging leadership role that a CAO must take on. Third, as expected, variation abounds in the experiences of CAOs depending on the size of their municipality. For those in very small communities, the number of hats and sheer breadth of responsibility are overwhelming. Feeling under-compensated and a lack of job security are also problems. For others, media, political and/or community scrutiny and lack of work-life balance or anonymity add stresses to the job. A few CAOs specifically mentioned the mental health implications that emerge when these stressors intensify. Alberta municipalities and individuals seeking to improve the stability of the CAO’s position should carefully consider these important warning signs.

## PART IV: LESSONS LEARNED

Current CAOs offered tremendous insights about their roles, with important learnings about the current work conditions in Alberta's municipalities for top talent. But what can be learned from those who left the job? Are there additional insights that they can offer when looking back on their experiences?

This final substantive section draws from three in-depth interviews with past Alberta CAOs. One interviewee worked in a small municipality and served as the sole employee before departing. The other two led staff teams as part of their CAO role. One retired after a long tenure as CAO; council terminated the other. In-depth interviews with departed CAOs offered useful insights in long form. Personal or identifiable details have been removed to protect the interviewees' confidentiality.

### SETTING A STRONG FOUNDATION

The interviews began with a discussion about the initial experience when taking on the CAO role: decisions to join the municipality and/or move up into the CAO role; the onboarding experience; and early learnings on the job:

- “I’d been doing a lot of contract roles so I could get experience in different areas, and then I got into a CAO role in a small village. I fell in love with the job. It was amazing — but a lot to learn. It meant learning everything that has to do with municipalities and all of the different legislation and requirements. It was a lot, and my mind was constantly on work. I was the only administrative person, so there was no onboarding. You basically have to figure it out on your own. It was very, very difficult to find the information that you need all the time. The only thing that really helped were the regional partners and the other CAOs. They would let me know where to look for the information I needed, or one even provided me some education and training. A few times, Municipal Affairs would come in and say, oh we need this, this and this. Which is something you don’t even know you need to do unless you’re in the role. So when I left, I created a whole list and some documents to be ready to sign — things to make it a little bit easier for the next person taking over, just based on things I wish I’d had when I started.”
- “I’d been working in municipal government for a long time. I started as [entry level role] and moved up to [more senior] roles. The CAO job came up in [a mid-sized municipality] and I was thinking I had all the knowledge in the world, after what I’d been doing in [another municipality]. One sometimes believes that they have the abilities and the knowledge to just step into these things — and you know, surprisingly enough, you actually don’t and you don’t know a lot of the things you need to or will have to know as a CAO. [...] So my onboarding was a bit scary because I realized quite quickly that I did lack a fair amount of knowledge and that would have helped out a lot in, for example, council orientation. I came in just after an election. We had a mostly new council, and naturally they look to the CAO for a lot of things, and even though I’d done my homework with a new group of politicians each one has a different way of looking at the world. The change in itself was daunting, and their expectations were probably higher than what they should have been. I had the support of a [CAO mentor] and that helped a lot. We went in there very carefully, you know, careful baby steps to not make assumptions about where people were coming from or what they were thinking. It was all about listening, which is a key competency for a new CAO for sure.”

- “Two lessons stand out, the first one was administrative and the second one political. From the get go, I was probably a little naive. I had no idea when I became CAO that there were so many HR issues, so many employee relations problems — from harassment to people just not getting along — I mean I obviously knew some of it, but a lot of it is kept strictly confidential. So that was consuming, and it really caught me off guard. The bigger one though was about council. I started in February and the election was in October, so I had about nine months with council. I knew radical change was coming but I don’t think I appreciated what it meant. In an instant, we went from a place that I would say had very solid council-admin relationships to ... well, I remember I got a call [...] after the election. We invited council to a dinner to get to know one another, to talk about goals, expectations. I got a call from one of the new councillors, a good friend of the new mayor: why would we want to do this, when what we want is for you to fire [a subordinate]? So that was sort of my baptism into what was a very new world, and it stayed that way for [more than 10] years, where politics became a much larger part of my job than I’d even anticipated. My bread and butter is being a great leader, a great administrator — that’s my passion — but it’s the other stuff, the political side, that’ll throw you off.”

All three former CAOs agreed that stronger onboarding support for CAOs would be an excellent contribution towards stability and success for those in the role.

## NAVIGATING THE JOB’S CHALLENGES

The former CAOs offered a wealth of insightful stories and experiences which shed light on the lived experience in the role, with important learnings for current and future CAOs alike.

- “I’d never really wanted to be the CAO, but I got a reputation for being a good leader of people. My friends would say to me, you’ve got to go for it, you’ve got to be the next one. So it just sort of happened, I guess. For me, the joy was always in working with people. I like to put on the coveralls. This is my management style. I’d visit all of the departments, get to know their work, drive the trucks, load recycling onto the conveyor belts, show up to paint park benches. I learned to drive the Zamboni. So maybe I’m a little bit old school — but I don’t want to ask someone to do something that I’m not willing to do myself. I know it sounds simplistic and all, but I think it was one of the things I did best. If people were to describe me, I think they’d say genuine and trustworthy — because they knew me, they’d see me getting up when they get up, it wasn’t just approving budgets and being at council. And it gave me a better understanding of what we were recommending and why. [...]
- One of the things I took from my [academic program] was about creating a very participative management style, a very open culture. So I created what we called [large all-staff meetings] a couple times a year. Basically, a giant pep rally informing the team of what we were doing, what’s happening, how the community is changing, what’s in the budget, what stores are coming to town - everything. So if someone stopped any member of the team on the street and asked them what was going on, they knew. We’d also throw in some fun from time to time. I also would write an email to the entire team every Monday morning. My executive assistant helped me, especially when everything was just getting busier and busier. But it was a highly anticipated thing, and especially through COVID, I got so much great feedback. I would include everything that was going on at the city and also some life things, like about raising my kids or what was happening in the news. I always called in lending myself to the organization, being real. I had to love coming to work, and show it, if I wanted everyone else to also love coming to work.”

- “I loved the role. I love to be busy, so I think that’s why I enjoyed taking it on. The problem was that the council just kept adding things to the role and not really thinking about what they were adding. Oh, here’s this new thing, let’s do it. Let’s annex this land, let’s add more meetings. They were not thinking, we have one person — or maybe we add a second person to cover some administrative things to free up the CAO.”
- “The role and responsibility issue is always one that has been fraught with interpretation. Smaller communities feel that council needs to be involved, because they know everybody and the CAO who comes in green doesn’t have the ability to talk them out of things so simply concedes. So that mayor and council relationship, it’s key. It’s a core competency. Political astuteness, it’s key. You don’t have to be drinking buddies with them, but you do have to know which way the wind is blowing — and if you’re not careful, it only takes a few. I’ve seen too many examples of CAOs where they come in and it’s their way or the highway, as opposed to an attitude about working as a group.”

All three former CAOs clearly articulated personal growth and development in the role. All reflected on how little, in retrospect, they knew when first taking on the role about what would end up being some of the most important and challenging parts of the job. All demonstrated through their comments ways that they had become better equipped to do the job through learning in the role, something that will become a key observation for this study, especially when paired with overall reductions in the length of CAO tenure.

## ENDINGS AND TRANSITIONS

The former CAOs were asked to share observations and learnings from their departures from the role, once again offering important lessons for the sector.

- “I liken the CAO role to the CEO of an organization, and you report to a board of directors — the council. I have a business background, and you know, there is a way things should be done. But with council, it’s different, there’s a lot of non-authentic communications. A lot of grandstanding. A lot of behind the door negotiations and discussions. I found that particularly difficult. I had a mayor who could be the nicest guy but then the next day he’s yelling at you and slamming the door. I was brave enough to stand up to all of that, and I followed through with the code of conduct, but then quickly learned that the rest of council didn’t know how to deal with those things. So you’re on your own anyways. It’s a very isolated position when the political arena doesn’t go well. And it’s never all of council, it’s usually just a few disruptors. Never all of them. But it’s a lot of luck of the draw — what political agendas, what personalities, who gets in and who can sway that group. [...]
- I can tell you one thing — things have changed. From even ten years ago, things are different. The increase in technology. Social media. Expectations of the public. Expectations of the council, especially on the CAO’s availability. And then the pandemic. We were meeting every single day for months and months. Talking to the Premier, having to lay off staff, constant communications. It was two or three years when even if you did take a vacation day, it was basically a day on call. So there was this evolution, intensification. I don’t know what to call it, but the world has changed dramatically over the past ten years. [...] I could see there was a huge amount of turnover in our field. We have a network, you know, so we talk. And it’s really tough now to balance the political side and running an organization, which takes a lot of talent in its own

right. So when you're trying to do both, and especially when they are at odds — that gets really challenging.”

- “So there’s an annual review that must be done. It was shortly after we’d switched our [council] meetings to be a bit more frequent. I came up with this whole proposal of what I thought the job was worth, based on the additional hours and added responsibilities that had been added and were on the horizon. Council would add things, and be like, oh yeah that’s fine — not realizing they’d just committed two more hours of my time without extending my actual time of work. They didn’t realize that coming out of those extra meetings, there’s so much work to do. There’s no overtime. So I proposed we make the CAO job full time. I had a whole plan put together. And they didn’t take it. So that’s when I started to look for work elsewhere.”
- “The size of community is very telling. Smaller communities have a lot of turnover, because someone moves in as CAO but they can’t wait to get out. And in some cases, as soon as they can they will make a jump into a medium and then larger communities from there. I think places like Calgary and Edmonton are exempt from that — maybe Lethbridge, Grande Prairie, Red Deer. One issue in my mind is when headhunters are brought in, because it’s the things they don’t interview for that will end up making the difference. Often I think there is more talent in the organization that gets overlooked, and instead they pay a headhunter to come in — and then the person they hire doesn’t stay.”

## **OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

There is a lot to be learned through interviews with those who have occupied CAO roles. Exit interviews within organizations, or as a sector, could help inform strategies to increase the CAO’s success and role satisfaction.

These three departed CAOs all agreed that more onboarding support is needed, and that much of the growth and development occurs on the job. Each municipality is a bit different and each term of council brings its own dynamics. It’s a role that requires on-the-job learning and the ability to navigate change, and people in the role get better at it over time — so providing that time and support for development is a key investment towards the stability of top professional leadership, and administrative viability more broadly.

## PART V: CONCLUSIONS

This paper began with words penned nearly a century ago about the rise of the CAO role as an important innovation, reflecting an acknowledgment of the rapidly increasing importance and complexity of local government. The CAO role was introduced as a means of professionalizing the delivery of local services and “consistent with the essential doctrines of democracy” creating a separation between politics and administration. It has withstood the test of time and is now a standard feature of municipal governments all across Canada, including in Alberta.

Municipalities’ capacity to attract and retain the needed talent to oversee local public services —administrative viability — is a necessary component in the success of local governments in Alberta. And it hinges on the primary administrative position: the CAO.

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Some of the data presented in this study are positive. CAOs generally seem to be public servants who take high levels of pride and ownership in their work. They seem to have positive working relationships with their administrations. There is clear variation across municipalities, and there are certainly examples where the CAO role appears to be strong and stable, suggesting positive things about the dynamics and context in those municipalities.

However, on the whole, the data across Alberta municipalities point to a number of alarming trends. CAOs’ tenure is steadily shortening, with a clear theme emerging from the interviews and survey data that the political dynamics are a major part of the problem. CAO transitions are costly for municipalities in many ways: the financial cost of departures, recruitment processes and onboarding of new hires; the disruption in the organization; and energy taken away from other priorities to focus on settling a new leader into the role. As one survey respondent said: “the shelf life of a municipal CAO is short — and as a result becomes extremely costly for municipalities.” What are the broader implications of these trends?

### IMPLICATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE VIABILITY

The disruptions, challenges and stresses of the past few years have intensified existing challenges in Alberta’s municipal sector. Longstanding financial pressures have reached the point of crisis, with rising costs of everything from fuel to materials to labour. Existing community challenges including housing affordability, mental health and addictions, poverty and more have been exacerbated. The landscape and conditions shaping the experiences of the top professional municipal role have also changed.

At a time when top talent can increasingly live and work anywhere,<sup>17</sup> why should they choose Alberta’s communities? At what point do the political dynamics make the role undesirable for those who have other options?

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<sup>17</sup> One important effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is a dramatic change in workers’ preferences. The 2022 Future of Work in Canada survey (Lowe, Gilbert and Hughes 2023) found that almost two-thirds of workers in Canada worked from home during the pandemic and those working at home tend to be knowledge workers with higher levels of income and education. Those working at home report higher levels of job satisfaction (by almost 10 points) and productivity, coupled with higher self-reported mental and physical health. Demand for remote work opportunities impacts both the pool of top talent who may be interested in CAO roles (and have more opportunities to work in organizations not bound by geography), but also has an enormous impact on the nature and style of municipal management, particularly in large organizations with strong public sector unions.

Fifteen years ago, Professor John Donahue from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard wrote a distressing book. *The Warping of Government Work* (2008) argued that times of economic turbulence change the nature of the public sector workforce, in which top talent will depart for other (usually private sector) opportunities while “lower talent” workers will remain in government roles for the stability, due to a lack of better opportunities. This, Donahue argues, is the “warping” of government work.

In times of dramatic changes — major demographic waves, changes to worker preferences and expectations, intensification of pressure on public officials and public sector organizations, shifts in social and traditional media landscapes and low trust and heightened political division — policy-makers are wise to pay close and careful attention to the implications for the administrative viability of Alberta’s municipalities.

The CAO role is important, challenging and requires on-the-job learning. Each municipality and term of council are at least a bit different from one another. For these reasons, the tenure and longevity of CAOs should be considered a leading indicator of administrative viability in Alberta. As the data presented here have demonstrated, currently this is a negative indicator in Alberta. The revolving door<sup>18</sup> is spinning faster and it’s making what otherwise would be a peak professional role a less desirable route for talented people to choose.

CAO transitions occur for many different reasons, sometimes warranted and sometimes as a result of circumstances that perhaps could have been improved. The perspectives shared by both current and former CAOs clearly point to the political dynamics as being a major part of the problem. As a former CAO stated:

I don’t know if it’s Trump-style politics or what, but we see councillors attacking each other and staff who have no credibility with council and there is nothing really that when you’re in the situation that you can do to change it. [...] There is no one to enforce it, no one to enforce good behavior politically. I don’t know if it’s just watching too much CNN and stuff like that, but I’m seeing more and more of this and it really scares me. It scares me for the future of trying to find people that genuinely want to make a difference and lead a good organization.

The post-election pattern of CAO transitions is a concerning finding because it suggests that they are indeed highly linked to changes in the political agenda rather than a reflection of the performance of those in the role. This is also at odds with the foundational idea that the CAO role was intended to be a separation between political agendas and a professionalized delivery of services. It may reflect something of the broader environment in which council understands its role to be something of an opposition party to hold administration to account rather than seeing the role as playing different positions on the same team. In some cases, a CAO termination may be an expression of dissatisfaction among residents in their municipality or their own quality of life generally, putting pressure on elected officials to clean up the municipality and a high-profile termination is a blunt instrument to demonstrate action on this agenda. But, importantly, it may do little to

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<sup>18</sup> In completing this project, the authors were surprised to learn that professional associations for CAOs now offer handbooks to help CAOs transition from being fired into a new beginning, because this path of transition has become so common. These handbooks include helpful suggestions on severance conditions to build into CAO contracts and tips for managing the financial, mental health and family implications of unwanted professional transitions. A helpful resource, but a concerning reflection of a much larger problem.

address the actual root issues (or as one survey respondent stated, “Don’t be so knee jerk to change CAOs and think it will fix everything”) and carries significant cost and disruption to the organization and community. When it happens frequently, it can become a negative spiral which makes it even more difficult for that particular municipality to attract talented leaders.

Many of these patterns warrant close observation and careful analysis over the years to come. In municipalities with high levels of turnover, internal analysis of the reasons for this disruption may be especially warranted. Broadly, strategies to increase CAO stability can include stronger onboarding and orientation for CAOs. More education for members of council about the CAO’s role and investing in regional support and mentorship would all mark important steps forward. More systemic, foundational efforts to strengthen local governance such as building shared agendas and trust between councils and administration oriented towards community outcomes are all important investments in the future success of Alberta’s municipalities.

## **APPENDIX A: COMPARING CAO TENURE OVER TIME**

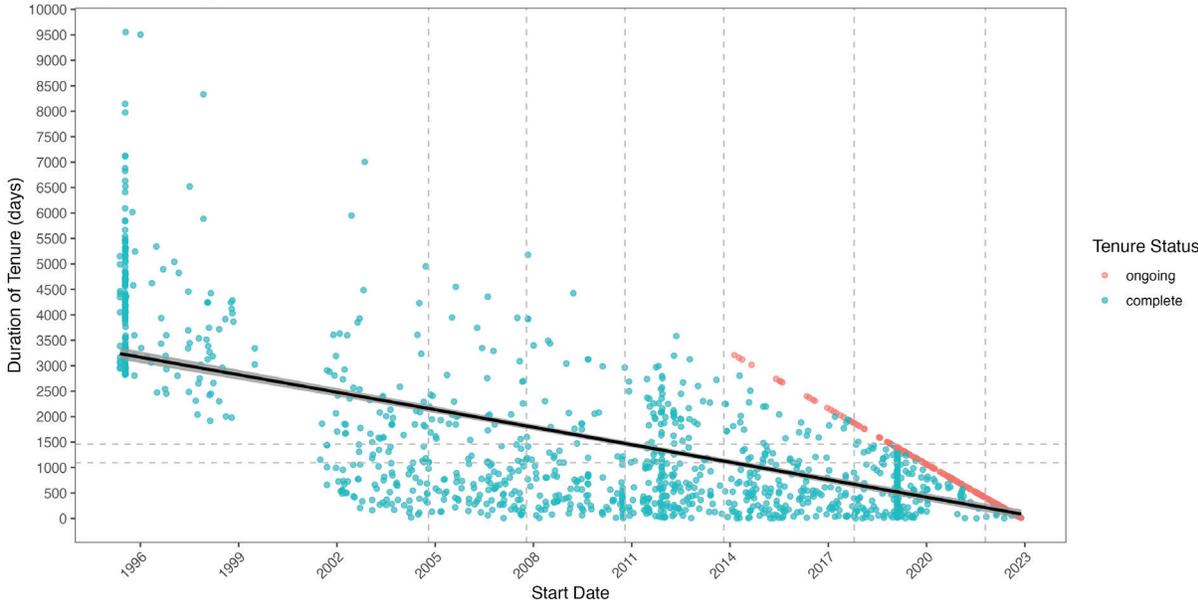
There are 2,052 total observations in the dataset. The analysis in this paper focuses for the most part on just permanent CAOs, of which there are 1,517. However, 267 of the total observations in the dataset have start dates that are before the Alberta government started tracking changes. The earliest of these observations dates back to 1995. The problem of including these observations is that there are no observations of CAOs who started in the same time period but ended their tenures before the tracking system was started. Those 267 observations are excluded.

In 327 of the total observations, the CAO's tenure is ongoing as of the date the dataset was obtained (Nov. 28, 2022). These observations are excluded from most of the primary analysis. The excluded observations are indicated in pink in Figure 12, which shows all observations in the dataset, coloured by whether the CAO's tenure is complete (blue) or ongoing (pink).

To establish a duration for those tenures that are ongoing, an end date of the Friday of the last week of the dataset (Dec. 2, 2022) was used. As shown in Figure 14, these ongoing tenures have longer durations than the complete tenures (by definition). This is an issue for the three most recent council terms (but not the others, as all observations are complete tenures). Figure 13 shows the duration of all CAO tenures (whether ongoing or complete).

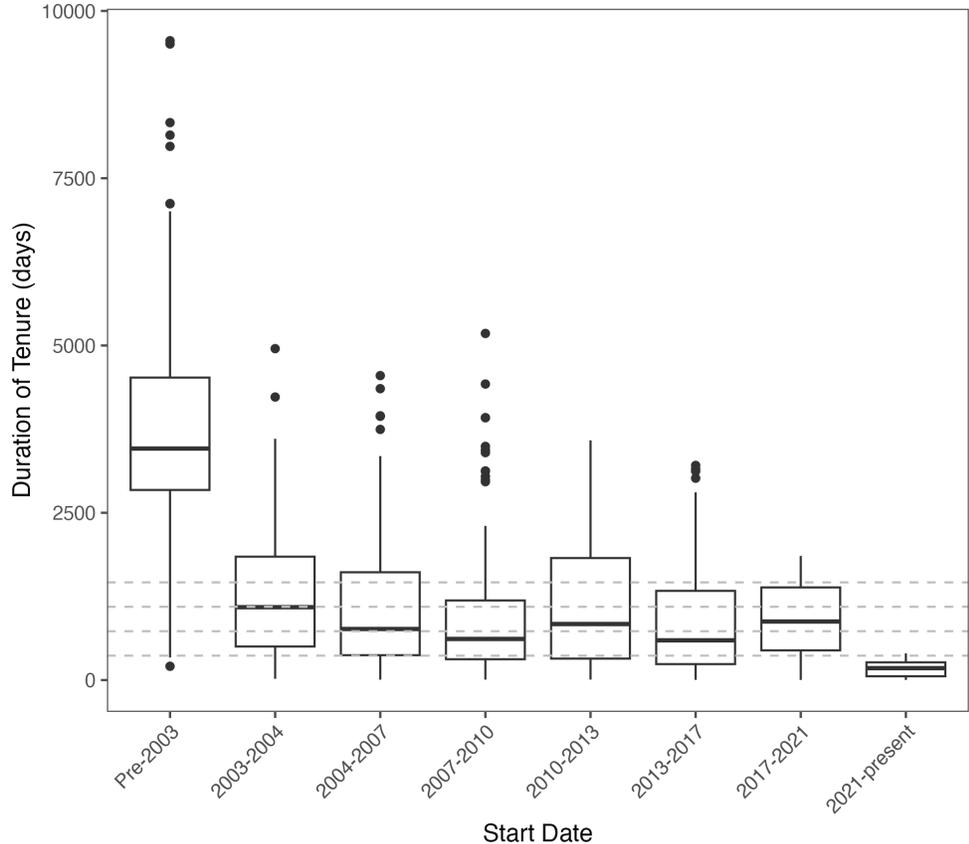
CAO tenures that started after the 2021 election have been excluded from the primary analysis of CAO tenure over time because such a high proportion of CAO tenures are ongoing (86 per cent), such little time has elapsed and there is minimal variation in tenure. Readers should be cautious about drawing definitive conclusions about the 2017-2021 period, in which 47 per cent of CAO tenures are ongoing. Only 11 per cent of CAO tenures are ongoing in the 2013-2017 period, so although the values reported are lower than they will be once all of these tenures end, the impact of excluding these observations is not as substantial.

**Figure 12: Length of Tenure of CAO Over Time, All Observations in the Dataset**



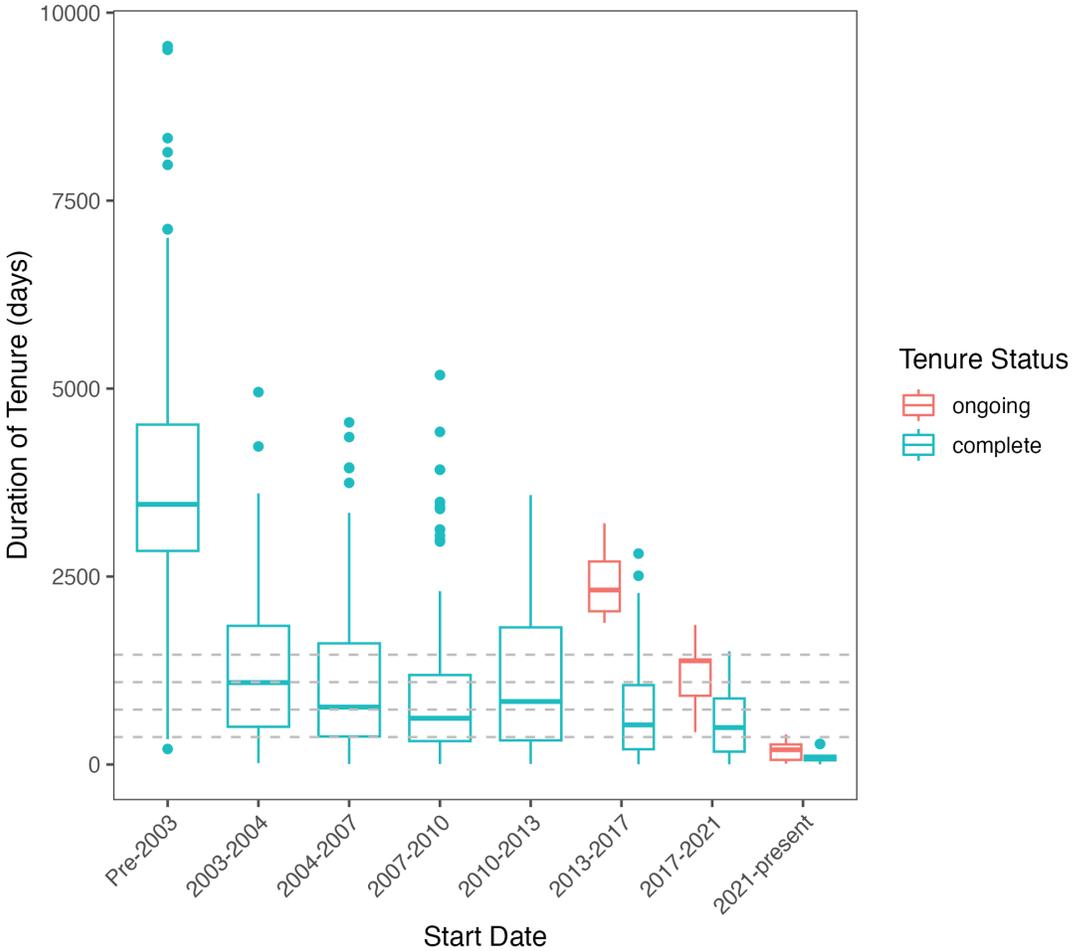
Source: Calculated from Ministry of Municipal Affairs CAO changes file, 2003-2022

**Figure 13: Length of Tenure of CAO by Start Date**



Source: Calculated from Ministry of Municipal Affairs CAO changes file, complete and ongoing tenures, permanent CAOs only, 2003-2022

Figure 14: Length of Tenure of CAO by Tenure Status and Start Date



Source: Calculated from Ministry of Municipal Affairs CAO changes file, complete and ongoing tenures, permanent CAOs only, 2003-2022

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**Dr. Kate Graham** researches, writes, speaks and teaches about politics in Canada's communities. She holds a PhD in Political Science (Local Government) where her research examined the power of urban mayors in Canada. She currently teaches at Huron University College (Political Science and Governance, Leadership & Ethics) and Western University (Local Government Program). In 2021, Kate was awarded the MacNaughton Prize for Excellence in Teaching together with Dr. Neil Bradford.

Kate is a Senior Advisor with Colliers Project Leaders, working with municipal governments across Canada on issues of governance, decision making, priority setting, community engagement and research. Kate has been a consultant for the past five years, building on a decade working in local government – most recently as the Director, Community & Economic Innovation at the City of London. She is a co-author of the textbook, *Local Government in Practice: Cases in Governance, Planning and Policy* (2019); and, author of two books about women in Canadian politics.

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**Jesse Helmer, PhD(c)** is something of a Swiss Army knife, with expertise and experience in local government from several angles. He is a former Deputy Mayor and Ward 4 Councillor for the City of London, serving two terms on council, which included several months of leadership as Acting Mayor during the COVID-19 pandemic. During his time on Council, Jesse chaired several local bodies including the London Transit Commission, the Middlesex London Health Unit and the Budget Committee of the London Police Services Board.

Jesse now works at an Ottawa-based think tank, the Smart Prosperity Institute, working on climate- and family-friendly housing policy for communities across Canada. He is completing his PhD (local government) at Western University, and now teaches in the graduate Local Government Program. Before entering politics and academia, Jesse worked in the nonprofit sector and as a partner in a small business.

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