



Why Audit Committees should know about Asset Retirement Obligations


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Municipalities have evolved significantly over the last two decades and this evolution has escalated over the last two years due to the huge push towards digital transformation. Municipalities have come to a refreshed realization about the dynamic change it needs from their citizens resulting in a push towards a citizen-centric approach to defining their goals and objectives.

With all this change, the citizens are looking for new and improved ways to obtain information from the municipalities and public sector entities generally. They are looking for information that is timely, accurate and accessible. For instance, more and more municipalities are moving towards quarterly financial reporting to provide more timely information to stakeholders.

The finance function within municipalities tend to focus a large portion of their resources on their budget-setting process each year, relative to financial reporting. This budget sets out the municipality's operating and capital spending plan for the next year, leading to the determination of the necessary tax levy to support the planned spend. It is necessarily a cash-based document, which leads to difficulty in comparing it to a municipality's financial results, which are prepared on a basis prescribed by the Chartered Professional Accountants Canada. The annual financial statements are presented on an accrual basis in accordance with Public Sector Accounting Standards (PSAS). This disconnect between the cash basis and accrual basis often makes it difficult for 'Those Charged With Governance' (TCWG) to fully understand the actual financial results since relatively more resources are deployed towards the creation of the budget than the presentation of the financial results. While there are quite a few intersections between the budget-based reporting and PSAS reporting, there are many differences that can come in the way of effective municipal financial management and oversight.

Please note that the discussion in this paper is relevant for all public sector entities that report their financial results in accordance with PSAS. While the specific examples in this paper focus on municipalities, the same implications can be applied to other entities with slight modification to incorporate the differences in operations in the various types of public sector entities.

With that in mind, let's talk about a new reporting standard which is required to be implemented by public sector entities for years ending on or after April 1, 2022 and why it is important for TCWG to understand the implications of this new standard. This standard pertains to Asset Retirement Obligations (ARO) and requires public sector entities to set up a liability related to the legal obligation for retiring a tangible capital asset. The assets that fall into this standard are the ones that are controlled by the public sector entity and includes leased assets. This standard has far-reaching impacts for municipalities and requires proper attention from TCWG, in order to exercise appropriate oversight over the financial reporting process. We have highlighted some key items here:

- (a) Completeness of liabilities
- (b) Legal obligations
- (c) Completeness of assets
- (d) Technical expertise
- (e) Financing repercussions
- (f) Environmental Social Governance (ESG) implications

Let's talk about these one by one!

a. Completeness of liabilities

In many cases, the liability associated with AROs has not been recorded within the financial records of the public sector entities which means that these entities are underreporting their obligations. It is possible that certain public sector entities might have some of these obligations included within their legal obligations however it is unclear how these are being tracked and whether the process used to determine the magnitude of these legal obligations is accurate.

Not only is it important to have accurate and complete information for the measurement and recognition of these liabilities for financial reporting purposes, but the same information is also equally important for financial planning and for effective financial management of the municipalities.

One of the tools used by municipalities in order to perform long term financial planning is through reserves and reserve funds to ensure they have sufficient funds set aside for future needs. If a municipality does not have a clear understanding of their ARO liability, it would hinder their ability to assess the adequacy of their reserve funds. Cash flow management would also be impacted due to the potential unplanned outflow in any given year.





b. Legal obligations

Next, let's talk about legal obligations. It is important to understand that the obligation related to the ARO is a legal obligation. However, unlike some of the traditional legal obligations, where there might be uncertainty around the outcome of the legal item, there is no uncertainty related to the existence of the future obligation related to an ARO. This means that the future settlement is guaranteed for an ARO and the uncertainty in this situation is limited to the quantification or the amount of the future settlement.

Not getting a good handle on the ARO liability also increases the risk of negative legal implications for the municipality in the future. As an example, if there is a contaminated site that requires a municipality to perform clean up to ensure the safety of the residents, but this contamination is not rectified in a timely and reasonable manner as required by environmental regulations. This could result in severe legal implications for the municipality due to the hazardous nature of these materials and potential negative health impact on the residents.

The new ARO reporting standard also includes the concept of promissory estoppel as part of the legal liability assessment. For your convenience, we have included the definition of promissory estoppel in the glossary at the end of this document.

The key point that is important to emphasize is that it would be important to engage a legal expert as part of the ARO implementation team as this assessment might be outside the expertise of the core finance team members.

c. Completeness of assets

When Canadian municipalities first began reporting their tangible capital assets as a component of their balance sheets back in 1999, it was apparent that many municipalities did not have good historical data on the assets that they owned at that time and consequently many still do not have a complete listing of owned assets. A comprehensive approach to asset management brings numerous benefits to local and regional governments and assists them in being able to demonstrate that taxpayers get good value from each capital asset they fund, in part or in whole.

This is a contributing factor as to why there are regulatory requirements for good asset management practices. For example, the Federal Gas Tax Agreement requires municipalities to demonstrate a strong asset management system. In absence of a well-thought-out asset management plan, local municipalities could put at risk the operational effectiveness of their assets, public health and safety and overall public confidence in the local government. A solid asset management approach helps to ensure reliability of the services offered by a local government and thus instill more confidence from the public.

Asset management itself is quite a broad topic of discussion for municipalities, perhaps the above description provides an understanding of why there is so much emphasis placed on good asset management. As important as it already was to have a complete listing of tangible capital assets in order to develop a reasonable asset management plan, it has become even more so with the implementation of financial reporting standards for AROs. This due to the fact that AROs are based on identifiable

tangible capital assets controlled by the Entity. If the asset listing is not complete or not up to date, any obligations relating to assets not being reported would also not be captured. If items are missed in the scoping and measurement of AROs, this results in a significant risk for the municipalities where the corresponding liabilities will be incomplete. There might be other consequences of missing these liabilities for municipalities depending on the nature and extent of error such as cash-flow management, environmental and social implications.

The ARO standard does not require entities to assess their overall asset management approach for reasonableness. The ARO standard also does not require entities to undertake an asset management exercise to make sure they have a complete inventory of all of their assets. However, it is quite clear that the entities who have an accurate and complete listing of their assets through a well-thought-out asset management plan are the ones who will be in the best position to ensure completeness of their AROs.





d. Technical expertise

Another matter to consider and assess is the quality of the information that the entity has regarding their assets. How well does the entity understand its assets including the nature and components of its assets? For the finance team to scope and measure the ARO associated with different assets, they would need clear guidance from subject matter experts that understand the technical aspect of this determination.

Finance teams would likely have the requisite expertise relating to the cost and fair value of these assets but may not be as aware of the legal, environmental, and / or other obligations attached to these assets. The knowledge of subject matter experts will be to assist the finance team in this area.

In addition to legal experts, other experts on which the exercise may depend upon include individuals from the operations team, mechanical and engineering teams, etc.

It would be important to have a discussion with the finance team to identify which subject matter experts are considered necessary based on their initial assessment in order to make optimal resource allocations. It would also be important to note that these needs could change as the implementation project matures.

e. Financing repercussions

Even though not directly related to ARO, financing repercussions should also be front of mind with overall asset management, particularly when planning for asset replacement / remediation / maintenance. In different provinces in Canada, there are restrictions on the amount of borrowing for local municipalities. In Ontario, for instance, long-term borrowing is restricted to capital investments and is also subject to a prescribed maximum level based on a preset formula.

Local municipalities use debt to help finance large capital projects. Local municipalities conduct long-term financial planning through the adoption of a multi-year capital plan and a long-term fiscal plan that would typically consider the amount and timing of debt necessary to support the planned expenditures over the term of Council. It also becomes important to understand the useful life of the asset in order to match the cost to the period over which the benefits are received. This provides more affordable financing by matching the repayment term to the economic useful life of the project, instead of funding the entire cost from current revenues.

In recent years, we have noted the trend of the issuance of green bonds, with the province of Ontario reaching a whopping \$10.75 billion in green bonds in 2021. Other local municipalities are following suit and this move is expected to continue. It would be important to have a good grasp on the asset management plans before these green bonds are attached to environmentally friendly infrastructure capital projects. Talking about green bonds, let's move into other ESG considerations.



f. ESG Implications

It is quite interesting that the concept of ARO touches all three aspects of the ESG spectrum i.e., environmental, social and governance. Physical contamination caused by hazardous materials such as asbestos or the toxins and leachate from landfills are all contributors towards damaging the environment.

Inappropriate or sub-optimal treatment of these hazardous materials can have significant health detriments which becomes a social responsibility issue whereby the expectation is that public sector entities, especially municipalities would ensure appropriate level of remediation for these hazardous items. The heightened fiduciary responsibility in the public sector environment especially with the elected officials with the municipalities creates a huge need for an appropriate level of governance in place.

The ESG implications for ARO have gained a lot of traction in recent years. These discussions have become more important now as public sector entities work towards the implementation of this new standard. While it is important to embrace ESG into our strategic planning, it will be critical to ensure that this planning is comprehensive and well thought out. As daunting as this task can seem, the key is to have a structured approach to map out what is relevant for the organization and to design a plan to tackle these implications.

In conclusion, while the ARO standard implementation may seem like any other accounting standard implementation, it has far reaching implications from a municipal operational and governance perspective requiring consideration and input from the organization as a whole, not just its finance team. It is therefore critical to take the time to understand these implications and design a plan to address them in a meaningful manner.

We would be more than happy to continue this discussion with you. We are currently running customized sessions for different entities to help them understand these various implications of AROs and how to best address them.

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Glossary

Public Sector

Public sector refers to governments, government components, government organizations and partnerships. Each of these entities is a “public sector entity”. A government component is an integral part of government, such as a department, ministry or fund. It is not a separate entity with the power to contract in its own name and that can sue and be sued. A government organization is any organization controlled by a government that is a separate entity with the power to contract in its own name and that can sue and be sued. Public sector organizations have a higher accountability to the taxpayer – above and beyond the traditional fiduciary duty.

Promissory estoppel

The elements of a promissory estoppel claim are “(1) a promise clear and unambiguous in its terms; (2) reliance by the party to whom the promise is made; (3) [the] reliance must be both reasonable and foreseeable; and (4) the party asserting the estoppel must be injured by his reliance.”