



Elections New Brunswick



Annual Report
2020-2021

Annual Report 2020-2021

Published by: Elections New Brunswick

ISBN: 978-1-4605-2916-4 (Bilingual print edition)

ISBN: 978-1-4605-2917-1 (English version online)

ISBN: 978-1-4605-2918-8 (French version online)

Contact information:

102-551 King Street

P.O. Box 6000

Fredericton, NB

Canada E3B 5H1

Toll Free: 1-800-308-2922

Reception: (506) 453-2218

Email: info@electionsnb.ca

www.electionsnb.ca

October 25, 2021

Mr. Shayne Davies
Clerk of Legislative Assembly
Legislative Building, Centre Block
P. O. Box 6000
Fredericton, NB
E3B 5H1
Canada

Dear Mr. Davies,

I have the honour of presenting the Annual Report of Elections New Brunswick for the period April 1, 2020, to March 31, 2021.

I respectfully request that you forward this report to the members of the Legislative Assembly.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kim Poffenroth', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Kimberly A. Poffenroth
Chief Electoral Officer



Our Mandate

Elections New Brunswick's mandate is to conduct free and fair elections for New Brunswickers, to facilitate compliance with electoral laws, and to advance public awareness of and confidence in the electoral process.



Our Vision

Elections New Brunswick is a trusted organization that supports the democratic process by providing innovative electoral services to all New Brunswickers.



Our Core Values

Our three core values are the deeply ingrained principles that guide all of our actions and influence everything we do. They guide our internal conduct as well as our relationship with our stakeholders. They guide us in fulfilling our mandate and realizing our vision. These values are essential to creating a work environment that supports the execution of our strategy.

Integrity

We work in an honest and trustworthy manner administering transparent and non-partisan electoral processes that adhere to legal and ethical principles.

Innovation

We strive to develop new and better ways to improve our electoral processes and services provided to our stakeholders.

Professionalism

Our strength comes from the knowledge, experience and dedication of our staff. Working together, we consistently deliver high-quality electoral products and services.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| Message from the Chief Electoral Officer | .1 |
| Overview | .2 |
| Who We Are | .3 |
| Financial Summary | .4 |
| Electoral Events | .6 |
| Political Financing | .6 |
| Geography & Mapping | .7 |
| New Brunswick Voter Information Services | .7 |
| Operations | .8 |
| Communications and Outreach | .8 |
| Activities Related to Strategic Goals | .8 |
| 1. Encourage voter engagement | .9 |
| 2. Improve services to political parties | .10 |
| 3. Increase efficiency and effectiveness of electoral processes | .10 |
| 4. Increase employee satisfaction | .11 |
| 5. Improve workplace efficiency and effectiveness | .11 |
| 6. Increase organizational resilience | .12 |
| Looking Forward | .13 |

Message from the Chief Electoral Officer

When 2020-21 began, the staff of Elections New Brunswick had just begun working from home as a result of the arrival of COVID-19 in our province. The local elections scheduled for May 10, 2020, and two provincial by-elections were postponed by the Legislative Assembly, and there was no indication at the early stages of the pandemic when we would be able to return to work.

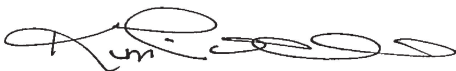
While *An Act Respecting Elections in 2020*, enacted on March 17, 2020, did not set exact dates for when the postponed elections would take place, it was clear that we would have to be ready for when they were rescheduled. While working from home, senior management developed a plan for how we could safely administer an election in the midst of a pandemic. Aware of the global demand for personal protective equipment, we ordered the masks, sanitizer, shields, plexiglass and other equipment and cleaning supplies that would be required to run a province-wide election during the pandemic.

Our office reopened to staff and the public following the long weekend in May 2020. We chose to have employees return on a staggered schedule, as we adjusted to the new health protocols that were necessary to make the return to work safe.

As it would turn out, Elections New Brunswick would become the first election management body in Canada to administer a province-wide election during the pandemic. On August 17, 2020, the Lieutenant-Governor dissolved the Legislature, setting September 14, 2020, as the date for an unscheduled provincial general election.

The impact of running the provincial general election during the COVID-19 pandemic is discussed in greater detail in a report that I submitted to the Legislature following that election. Suffice it to say that there were lessons learned, and we were asked by other election management bodies throughout the country heading into their own elections to share our experience as the proverbial “canary in the coal mine”. Following the provincial general election, we continued our work of preparing for the province-wide local elections that were rescheduled for May 10, 2021.

Conducting an unscheduled provincial general election and preparing for the rescheduled the province-wide local elections, during the pandemic, occupied the majority of our attention in 2020-2021. Nevertheless, we were still able to advance some of the actions in our *Strategic Plan 2018-2027*, which are highlighted in the pages that follow.



Kimberly A. Poffenroth
Chief Electoral Officer

Overview

As referenced in the Chief Electoral Officer's message, a good portion of our focus in fiscal 2020-2021 was on planning a safe return to work while coping with COVID-19, and then executing our plans for administering an unscheduled provincial general election in September 2020.

While the snap provincial general election created some operational challenges that we had to address, it also presented us with opportunities to move forward with some of the actions identified in our strategic goals. One such example was the development of a new pre-election mailer. The mailer was used to improve the accuracy of the Register of Electors in advance of the election and communicate important information to electors about the measures we were taking to make voting safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In October 2020, the date for the postponed municipal, district education council and regional health authority board elections was set as May 10, 2021. That placed us in the unusual position of conducting back-to-back province-wide general elections in a span of less than eight months.

While managing the many operational challenges that come with holding two large, province-wide events within less than one year of each other, Elections New Brunswick also moved forward with the implementation of a new strike-off solution which provides near real-time synchronization of the lists of electors on voting days and other improvements to the previously paper-heavy processes at the polls.



Who We Are

Elections New Brunswick's mandate is to conduct free and fair elections for New Brunswickers, to facilitate compliance with electoral laws, and to advance public awareness of and confidence in the electoral process.

The chief electoral officer administers elections to ensure they are fair and free of political influence as set out in the *Elections Act*. In addition, the Chief Electoral Officer holds the position of Supervisor of Political Financing and oversees compliance with the *Political Process Financing Act*. In New Brunswick, the Chief Electoral Officer is also the Municipal Electoral Officer and, as such, is responsible for all municipal council, district education council, and regional health authority board elections and plebiscites conducted under the *Municipal Elections Act*. As an officer of the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick, the Chief Electoral Officer must be non-partisan and may not vote in any election the administration for which she is responsible.

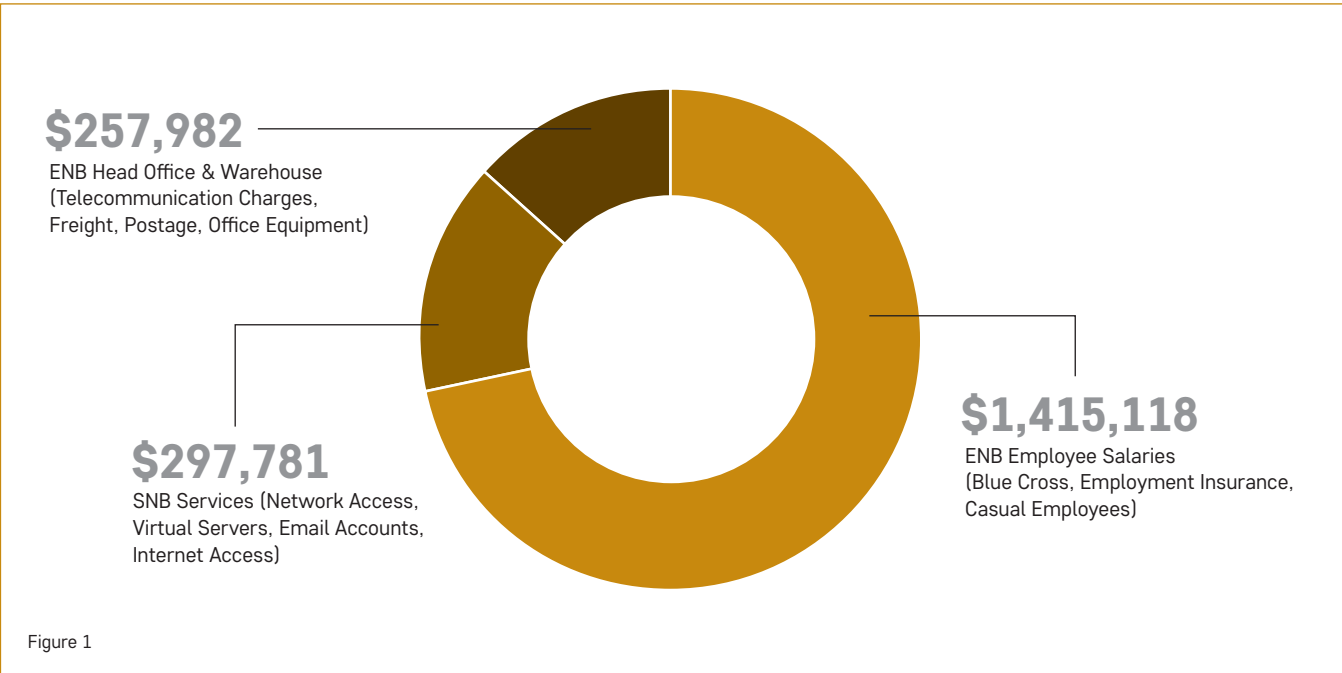
Elections New Brunswick has a full-time staffing complement of 16, with its corporate office located in Fredericton. The Chief Electoral Officer is supported in fulfilling her legislated duties by two Assistant Chief Electoral Officers, of whom one is responsible for overseeing electoral processes and activities and the other is responsible for overseeing the political financing processes and activities.



Financial Summary

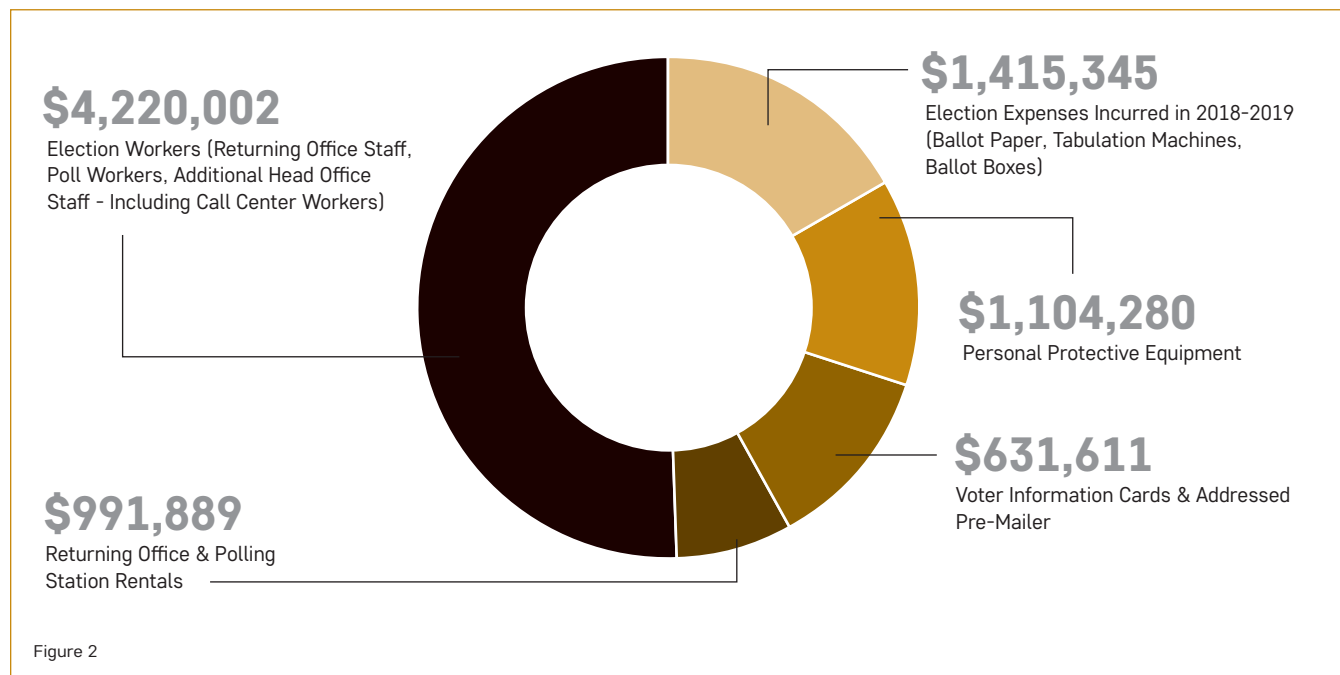
Elections New Brunswick submits its annual operating budget to the Legislative Administration Committee (LAC) for approval. Funding for the costs of administering electoral events and for special electoral improvement projects are submitted at the same time, but are treated as an expense over and above our annual operating expenses.

Our annual operating budget for fiscal 2020-2021 was \$1,970,880, the majority of which covers the annual salaries and benefits of 16 full-time employees (see Figure 1).



In fiscal 2020-2021, Elections New Brunswick spent \$11,548,777 for the administration of the unscheduled provincial general election held on September 14, 2020. This amount includes \$1.8 million which was the projected maximum liability for candidate reimbursements that had not been finalized by the end of the fiscal year.

The chart below (Figure 2) provides a high-level summary of the major expenses incurred with respect to the provincial election.



* A detailed breakdown of the costs associated with holding the unscheduled provincial general election can be found in the report on the Fourtieth General Provincial Election, which is available on the Elections NB website.

We also incurred expenses during this fiscal year preparing for the local general elections, which were postponed from May 2020 to May 2021. \$2,877,980 in expenses were incurred, with a significant portion covering returning office staff and building rental expenditures incurred despite the postponement. A more detailed summary of expenditures incurred for the rescheduled May 2021 local elections will be reported on in our next annual report.

Electoral Events

The September 14, 2020, provincial general election was the first unscheduled general election to be held in New Brunswick since 2006.

It was also conducted in the shortest election period permitted under the *Elections Act*, lasting only 28 days. The commencement of the general election superseded the requirement to hold provincial by-elections to fill vacancies in the Legislative Assembly for the electoral districts of Saint Croix and Shediac Bay-Dieppe. As previously mentioned, Elections New Brunswick was the first Canadian electoral management body to conduct a general election during the global pandemic.

These factors combined to make this an election like none other previously administered by this agency. We were forced to come up with creative and sometimes spontaneous solutions to unexpected challenges, while working within the limitations imposed by the *Elections Act*.

As indicated earlier in the report, in October 2020, we learned that the postponed local elections would take place on May 10, 2021. This necessitated planning and preparation activities immediately following the September provincial election.

Political Financing

The political financing branch takes the lead on behalf of the Supervisor of Political Financing in ensuring compliance with the political financing regime set out in the *Political Process Financing Act*.

Led by the Assistant Supervisor of Political Financing, the branch examines the annual financial returns of the registered political parties and registered district associations, as well as the electoral financial returns of all candidates and registered third parties in election years.

The Supervisor publishes an annual report summarizing the financial activities of political parties, district associations, leadership contestants, nomination contestants, candidates, and third parties. In April 2020, the annual report for 2017 was submitted to the New Brunswick Legislature.

In addition to the Assistant Supervisor of Political Financing, the political financing branch consists of one permanent employee and one seconded employee.



Geography & Mapping

In the 2020 provincial general election, there were nearly 580,000 eligible electors living in the 49 electoral districts in New Brunswick. Each of these electors was assigned to one of 1,766 polling divisions created for the electoral event; groups of electors were then bundled into unique polling division clusters that reported to one of the 617 polling stations opened for the election.

The geography and mapping branch is responsible for ensuring that every civic address that falls within the boundaries of an electoral district is correctly associated to a polling division, placed into both advance and ordinary poll clusters and then assigned to a polling station. This data feeds the voter information system, enabling Elections New Brunswick to send electors a voter information card which advises them of the locations where they are eligible to vote.

The geography and mapping branch consists of two permanent employees.

New Brunswick Voter Information Services

New Brunswick, like most other Canadian jurisdictions, maintains a permanent registry of electors. The names and addresses of registered electors are securely stored in the New Brunswick Voter Information System (NBVIS). NBVIS is a database system that is updated on an ongoing basis through data-sharing agreements with other government agencies, including motor vehicle registration and vital statistics.

Our goal of implementing an online voter portal to the register of electors would be a major advancement in increasing the accuracy of our database. The online portal would allow eligible electors to check if they are properly registered with Elections New Brunswick, to make a request to add their names to the register of electors, or to update their voter information electronically.

Under the *Elections Act* and the *Municipal Elections Act*, Elections New Brunswick uses the information in the register of electors to create lists of electors (voters lists) at the beginning of each electoral event that are required to enable voting and can be used by candidates for campaigning purposes.

On or before March 31 of each year, each elected member in the Legislative Assembly is provided with a copy of the list of electors for their respective electoral district. A list of electors for each electoral district is also provided to registered political parties on their request.

The register of electors is managed by one employee, with a budgeted position for a junior programmer.

Operations

Headquartered in Fredericton, Elections New Brunswick currently operates out of three buildings, one office and two warehouse locations where materials and supplies are stored and assembled in preparation for future elections.

The Director of Operations coordinates all procurement, finance and administration, information technology and warehousing activities with the guidance of senior management.

The operations branch consists of six permanent employees.

Communications and Outreach

The communications and outreach branch is responsible for all communication and outreach activities that occur both in advance of and during elections, as well as between electoral events.

2020-2021 saw the addition of a new position to the branch – a Corporate Communications Officer. The creation of this position was an important part of the realignment of Elections New Brunswick's organizational structure to our mandate and strategic goals. Reporting to the Director of Communications and Outreach, the Corporate Communications Officer is responsible for: coordinating and reviewing all translation projects, both in-house and external; preparing correspondence on behalf of the Chief Electoral Officer; revising all manner of documentation for the organization; drafting and designing forms and manuals; and assisting the Director with communication related projects and media relations.

The communications and community outreach branch consists of two permanent employees.

Activities Related to Strategic Goals

Preparing for an election to be administered during a global pandemic for the first time meant that it was critical that Elections New Brunswick communicate with and educate electors on the steps that we would take to make voting safe.

1. Encourage voter engagement

- An up-to-date register of electors helps to ensure eligible electors are directed to the right polling station and processed more quickly, meaning they spend less time waiting in line-ups. In advance of the September 2020 provincial general election, every household in the province was sent an addressed envelope indicating the names of every elector we had listed as living at that address. People were directed to call Elections New Brunswick if their voter information required updating. Over 10,000 calls were handled by our call centre from people making updates to the voter registry or asking to be added as a new elector. This form of electronic enumeration proved successful and is something we will continue to use.
- The pre-mailer we sent to every household included a flyer that contained information on the measures that would be in place, following public health guidelines, to make visiting polling stations and returning offices safer for electors, as well as for our workers.
- Elections New Brunswick also developed a campaign using social media and television commercials to encourage electors to vote early to help us “flatten the election curve” by spreading out the times and places people would vote.
- The September 2020 provincial general election provided Elections New Brunswick with the opportunity to evaluate the impact of, as well as the interest of electors in, using mail-in ballots as an alternative mean of voting. Electors nervous about voting in-person at a polling station took advantage of the option to vote by mail.
- Additionally, because the COVID-19 pandemic prevented us from setting up additional polls to facilitate voting for electors living in treatment centres, such as nursing homes, we modified mail-in ballot processes to allow the returning officers in each electoral district to hand-deliver the applications and mail-in ballot packages to electors in those facilities who had indicated that they wanted to vote in the election.
- In total, over 13,000 mail-in ballots were requested and processed manually at the 49 returning offices. It proved to be a very resource intensive process that will require significant logistical and process improvements if it continues to be a method of voting electors prefer to use.
- Elections New Brunswick engaged the Consortium for Electoral Democracy to conduct a survey following the September 2020 provincial general election to determine voters’ satisfaction with the measures taken by us to keep them safe during the election. Of the 699 respondents to the survey, 95% indicated that Elections NB took appropriate precautions to ensure the election was conducted safely.



2. Improve services to political parties

- With the call of the unscheduled provincial general election in September 2020, there were limited opportunities to make any significant advancements on the actions identified in supporting this strategic goal.
- Elections NB had acquired the new voter strike-off system that would allow for communicating in near real-time who had voted at polling stations. However, plans to deploy the Poll Pad technology as a pilot during provincial by-elections scheduled for June 2020 were derailed by the delay of those by-elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic and with the call of the unscheduled provincial general election. Training of returning office staff on the Poll Pad technology continued in fiscal 2020-2021 with a revised plan to deploy it in the May 2021 local elections.

3. Increase efficiency and effectiveness of electoral processes

- As noted in our 2019-2020 annual report, Elections New Brunswick made public and tabled with the Legislative Assembly the discussion document, *Modernizing New Brunswick's Electoral Legislation*. It proposed major amendments to modernize the legislation that guides us in the administration of elections, a number of which directly address actions that we have identified in our strategic goal to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the electoral process that we oversee. It was also noted that the recommendations made would only happen if government brought them forward for debate and discussion.
- In June 2020, we submitted a memorandum to the Executive Council Office seeking approval and direction from executive council to move forward with the amendments proposed to the three pieces of legislation. At the time this report was being written, we had not received any indication as to the status of our memorandum.
- Following the September 2020 provincial general election, we tabled a special report, *Post-Election Recommendations for Legislative Change*, with the Legislative Assembly. It restated some of the recommendations contained in our 2019 discussion document, but also identified additional amendments for government's consideration based on our experience of running the provincial election during the unusual circumstances of a public health emergency. This report was tabled in January 2021; on February 19, 2021, the Chief Electoral Officer was invited to appear before The Standing Committee on Procedure, Privileges and Legislative Officers to discuss the report and answer questions from committee members.



4. Increase employee satisfaction

Executing a province-wide election in 2020-2021 and preparing for a second to be held in May 2021 did not allow us to devote significant time to our structural reorganization. However, the retirement of a long-serving member of our staff did present the opportunity to move forward with realigning the responsibilities of that position.

- A new position of Corporate Communications Officer was created and opened to competition in November 2020, with a successful candidate hired in December 2020. Reporting to the Director of Communications and Outreach, the Corporate Communications Officer absorbed some of the duties related to internal translation and verifications as well as external correspondence. In addition, the Corporate Communications Officer was integrated into Elections New Brunswick's communications, marketing and media relations activities and provides support to electoral operations by revising all manner of documentation and designing forms and manuals.
- Starting off this fiscal year with our employees sent home due to the arrival of the pandemic created the potential for an internal communication void. To ensure our small group of employees was kept informed of developments related to our eventual return to the workplace and election preparation activities, weekly virtual meetings were held with staff. The practice of using virtual meetings continued when we returned to the workplace in May 2020.

5. Improve workplace efficiency and effectiveness

An important element in Election New Brunswick's ability to improve on the organization's efficiency and effectiveness will be realised with the physical co location of our head office and our warehouses.

- In January 2021, the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure entered into a contract with a Fredericton-area developer to build Elections New Brunswick a 28,000 square foot combined office and warehouse location. The tentative date for moving into the new co-located facility is spring 2022.

6. Increase organizational resilience

As referenced earlier in this report, Elections New Brunswick made some progress on our organizational restructuring. However, the constraint on resources with the emergence of COVID-19 in the Province and administering an unscheduled provincial election, limited our ability to move forward on actions connected to increasing our organizational resilience.

Despite these challenges, we were able to contribute to the work of the Secretariat for Electoral Coordination (Secretariat), an organization made up of the federal, provincial, and territorial election management bodies (EMBs) which facilitates and supports collaboration among the participating agencies:

- The Chief Electoral Officer participated in the Secretariat's Special Working Group on COVID-19 Election Preparation. The objective of the working group was to gather and disseminate information on election planning considerations during current and future pandemics, by sharing information in a secure environment on measures that EMBs were contemplating on election administration, legislation, and operations and measures taken in other countries.
- The Chief Electoral Officer participated in the Secretariat's working group established to review and revise the Secretariat's Memorandum of Understanding, which was signed by all participating chief electoral officers in October 2020. The Secretariat was established as a pilot project in 2018, the revised Memorandum of Understanding signed in October 2020 established the Secretariat as a permanent organization to facilitate and support the collaboration of the participating electoral management bodies in the maintenance and development of modern and innovative electoral processes across the country.
- The Chief Electoral Officer and the Director of Communications and Outreach also provided a presentation to their colleagues across the country on the experience of conducting an election during the COVID-19 pandemic and the lessons learned from that precedent setting event. The virtual presentation was organized by the Canadian Society for Election Official Training, of which Elections New Brunswick is a member, and was well attended by election officials from across the country eager to learn from the experience of the first EMB to conduct an election in these unprecedented circumstances.

Looking Forward

Fiscal 2020-2021 ended with our office fully engaged in preparations for administering the rescheduled May 2021 municipal council, district education council and regional health authority board elections. This is the second province-wide election Elections New Brunswick will run during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It should be noted that the unscheduled provincial general election, and the postponement of the May 2020 local elections, have thrown off the typical two-year cycle we had between large electoral events to plan and prepare. However, on a positive note, with the next provincial general election not scheduled until October 2024, we are hopeful there will be more opportunities for us to focus on strategic initiatives that were moved to the back burner as we focused on running three province-wide elections in well under three years – a significant accomplishment for our relatively small organization!