

Part II – Youth in Politics

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The last *Municipal Leader* explored ways to increase the participation of women in municipal politics. This series continues with an examination of issues surrounding youth involvement in the political field.

Issues of engaging youth in rural Manitoba are not new. With concern for a declining rural population, there has also been a concern with the increasing number of youth who migrate to large urban centres to pursue an education or a career opportunity and do not return to rural areas. This trend has consequences for all sectors of the economy as well as for local municipal governments. In this province, the role of municipal politician has not appealed to many young people. The public service, as a whole, is experiencing a similar problem as a result of young people's growing disillusionment with the current systems of government. Over the long-term, this will have serious implications for the leadership of municipalities across the province.

The concern for low youth representation in the political field is widespread and is affecting political parties at both the

provincial and national scale. Low political participation also manifests in voter turnout that is typically lower among youth than all other age brackets. In fact, as a general rule it has been said that the percentage of turnout in national elections directly corresponds to the voters' age cohort – 25% of 25-year-olds vote, 70% of 70-year-olds vote. A corresponding trend finds many politicians focusing more on issues relating to older adults since they are more likely to cast votes on election day. Youth will continue to feel neglected by this system and will not be inspired to participate without increased attention from today's politicians.

Fortunately, there is substantial room for optimism. Low youth participation in traditional political arenas does not mean that youth are not interested in improving their communities and affecting change. There are several examples across Manitoba and Canada that illustrate the commitment that youth are making in their communities as well as the various ways of involving youth in the political system.

For instance, in Manitoba, *The Municipal Act* authorizes municipalities to appoint a

youth member to sit with the council and participate in its deliberations. Several Manitoba municipalities have taken advantage of this opportunity and incorporated a youth member into their council meetings. Another example is the Regina Regional Economic Development Agency (RREDA) that created the Future Leaders Group to foster the development of future community, business, government and institutional leaders. This group also provides a forum for youth to provide input on social and economic issues as well as to network with peers and mentors. In Ontario, an official body was created to represent Toronto's young people in municipal affairs. The Toronto Youth Cabinet encourages youth-led civic engagement and capacity building among the city's youth.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) has worked with the Canadian Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in developing a model for 'Growing Up in Cities.' This model is based on the premise that policy decisions affecting youth are often made without consideration



of the concerns of youth. The International Institute for Child Rights and Development, at the University of Victoria, established a Canadian organization. Strengthening the youth voice in local governance is one of the top issues tackled through research, education, capacity building and advocacy. To date, projects have been initiated in British Columbia, Quebec and Nova Scotia. Although the model specifically refers to youth in urban centres, some of the same principles will certainly apply to youth in rural areas.

These examples reveal the various ways that youth can become involved in the political sphere. It also points to the trend that “more youth are not joining political parties, they are joining political movements, which concentrate on direct action rather than the electoral system.”²¹ Youth are actively involved in other volunteer activities that directly benefit their communities. The community spirit of youth is displayed by increasing volunteerism at food banks, recreational facilities, health care centres, environmental organizations and many more community-driven organizations. Existing forms of youth engagement can establish a basis for further involving youth in the political aspects of local issues. Working with youth at this level will provide an opportunity to encourage youth to improve communities through the political process as well.

Recognizing leaders

Even with the optimism of established youth community spirit, new directions must be pursued in order for existing democratic institutions to gain relevance for Manitoba’s youth. To begin, it is important to recognize the contributions that youth already make in their communities. Not only are youth the leaders of tomorrow, they are taking on increasing responsibilities as leaders of today. Valuing these contributions will inspire pride and encourage youth to continue working to make a difference in their communities. Many governments give youth awards for their achievements in commu-

nity involvement and development. The Province of Manitoba is no exception, recognizing youth leaders through the Youth category of the Premier’s Volunteer Service Award, which is given to Manitobans under 25 who have made considerable contributions to their schools, organizations and communities through volunteer work.

Being open to the knowledge and skills that youth bring to the table is the first step towards engaging youth in a meaningful way. As municipal councils make youth engagement a priority, strides can be made towards increasing youth participation in local government.

Hearing youth voices

The second step toward involving youth is to find ways to initiate discussions and create opportunities for youth to make their voices heard. It is important to involve youth at the early stages of designing the participatory processes in order to identify the most effective forum for communication. For instance, some young people rely heavily on technology and the Internet as forms of communication and it may be beneficial to employ technology as part of a participatory process. Such inclusion from the outset will develop an environment of mutual respect and understanding that will allow both youth and adults to learn from one another.

Defining the process

Outlining clear objectives, roles and responsibilities will also be an important part of the youth inclusion process. There is some variation among organizations regarding what age groups are considered ‘youth.’ Some organizations define youth as high school and junior high students, while others extend the definition to young adults up to the age of 30 or 35. The appropriate definition for a municipal council will depend on the particular objectives of their youth participation initiative. It is also beneficial to define the type of participation that youth can offer. In the case of a youth member of council, the *Municipal Act* authorizes the municipal council to decide on the term and conditions of the appointment. Articulating expectations

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Compromise creates opportunity

Manitoba municipalities are fortunate to have the concept of a youth council member defined and supported by provincial legislation. In other parts of Canada, local governments don't always support the concept. This spring, local youth in Vaughan, Ontario had to fight for a place on the City Council. Their plan would have allowed a selected individual between the ages of 16 and 25 to attend council meetings with some of the rights and privileges of their elected counterparts, though not able to vote on matters before council or attend closed-door sessions. The Vaughan City Council rejected this initial proposal, but the Vaughan Youth Cabinet was not deterred. They revised their request and the council agreed to offer a youth councillor position to high school students for a one-year term. The first youth councillor will be selected in the fall of 2005. This compromise creates a valuable opportunity to establish mentoring relationships with the city council and to have a strong youth perspective represented in the political process in the City of Vaughan.

will assist the youth member and the entire council in gaining as much as possible from the experience.

Being well prepared to undertake measures to enhance youth participation will have a significant payoff. It is important to engage in meaningful and constructive action since youth are easily disillusioned by perceptions of tokenism or futile proceedings.

Complementary action

While designing processes to engage youth is an important component of increasing participation, it is also necessary to consider ways of involving youth in the programs already undertaken by your municipality. This can be accomplished by finding ways of attracting youth to public meetings or other key political events. As **Jeremy Harrison**, a 27-year-old MP from Northern Saskatchewan said, "I never had anybody ever tell me through my entire progression through politics, 'you know what, you're too young to do this. We think you should wait until you're 30.'" If youth are treated with respect for the perspectives and ideas they bring forth, they will be more likely to engage in what might typically be perceived as an 'adult's world.'

Benefits of youth civic engagement

Both youth and adults will gain from meaningful youth engagement projects. Enabling youth to gain first-hand experience will promote the value of informed public debate, advocacy and compromise. It creates commitment, teaches techniques and establishes a pool of young people equipped for subsequent involvements in the political realm. Municipal officials will have the opportunity to demonstrate the value of the public sector and the various forms of public service while raising awareness of political issues among youth. Establishing relationships will also combat cynicism about politics and politicians, at the same time helping to disprove negative stereotypes about youth.

Younger citizens should be identified as assets and resources. They are agents of change that can introduce new paths of community development. As young people and adults recognize one another as resources, they open themselves to learn from one another and explore new possibilities for collaboration. ♻️

¹ Martinez, Mauricio. 2002. The Challenge of a New Ideology. *Canadian Dimension*. 36(1): 28-31.

² MacCharles, Tonda. Tories to debate place of youth. *Toronto Star*. March 11, 2005, p. A08.

For more information

Toronto Youth Cabinet:

www.torontoyouth.com/youth_cabinet/init/index.php

Future Leaders Group (RREDA):

www.rreda.com (click on Initiatives)

Manitoba Municipal Act (Section 81):

web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/ccsm/m225e.php

Growing Up In Cities:

www.growingupincities.ca

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