

ELECTION FEVER HEATING UP

Municipal Information Network
Gord Hume...August 2014

The Labour Day weekend signals the start of really serious campaigning for Mayors and councillors in several provinces and territories that are having a municipal election this fall.

While skirmishes and a scattering of campaign signs have been present for some time in many towns and cities, the return of people from summer holidays and the beginning of the new school year somehow kicks-off the final rush and the most intense campaigning.

While every election is important, this year's local elections are going to see significant, even dramatic, changes in local leadership. The reason is that a number of long-serving mayors and councillors have chosen not to run again. Let's take a moment to thank them for their service. Public life is hard. They and their families know that.

This means communities are losing a familiar leader and their institutional memory. Mayors to a considerable extent, and councillors to more varying extents, are perceived as being a—even the—community leader. A Mayor's power and authority is significant and can help to lead a community up, or down. There is influence, power, strategic direction, economic prosperity, cultural vibrancy and social vitality for communities with strong leadership.

The list of mayors stepping down is long and distinguished, and certainly it is impossible to acknowledge every one. Every mayor impacts his or her community, for better or worse. Their legacies vary, but their influence is lasting and undeniable. Many council members also leave their own imprint on their community, and deserve our thanks and acknowledgement as well.

Kitchener's longest-serving mayor, Carl Zehr, is retiring after serving as mayor since 1997. His calm, steady hand has helped to propel Kitchener to new prosperity and opportunity.

Surrey, BC mayor Dianne Watts is completing her third term. She has helped to drive Surrey into a dynamic and fast-growing city with a remarkable future ahead. Her energy and smarts have been widely applauded and her legacy is assured.

In southern Ontario, there will be a dramatic change in the mayoral diaspora. New mayors are certain to be elected in Hamilton, Mississauga, Waterloo, London, Windsor and several other centres. Caledon Mayor Marolyn Morrison is retiring, and so is the redoubtable Hazel McCallion in Mississauga. At 93 years of age, she has been mayor since 1979.

New mayors may also be elected in several other cities. Races in Toronto and Brampton are going to be particularly interesting, as well as some other communities.

In British Columbia, there is a mixed bag of retiring mayors and new hopefuls running in towns and cities. The campaigning is heating up, and the always fascinating BC political landscape is sure to provide more excitement in the fall election.

Elections in Prince Edward Island and Manitoba complete a busy fall election schedule. Winnipeg mayor Sam Katz, first elected in 2004, won't be running again. His hard work and commitment have been significant, and that meant a loss of personal and family time. "I believe this is the decision that's best for my family. I can tell you, whoever becomes the next mayor, it takes a long time away from your family," he observed in his announcement.

That level of commitment and the challenges of living in the public spotlight is a common theme amongst people deciding not to run again. Mayors and Councillors are subjected to constant scrutiny, media probing and, increasingly, anonymous social media jibes, comments and rumours that can be hurtful and are often untrue. It adds stress and anguish to an already difficult job. At some level there comes a tipping point...

The counter-point, of course, is the opportunity to make a difference in your town or city. That is what drives so many dedicated and committed people seeking election. That is the spirit and attitude we need to keep moving Canada's communities forward, because our municipalities are in a global battle for talent, investment, opportunity and prosperity.

While local issues will vary from community to community, there will be some constants—the candidate's vision for that municipality; jobs and local economic prosperity; how we need to change the governance and financing of local governments; improving the cultural heart of the community; and, sadly, issues of integrity and honesty as we reel from the charges, allegations, convictions and community shivers as local residents have observed the antics of some of their elected officials.

We need great leaders to step forward today, and join the ranks of so many strong mayors and councillors that we have had in our communities in the past.

Public service is a hard life. Thank you to those retiring.