

“THANK YOU”

Gord Hume Fall 2012

As the fall election season approaches for many municipalities, we've seen a sobering part of the public process—announcements by mayors and council members that they will not run again.

Recently we've seen such respected mayors as Pat Fiacco in Regina, Bev Buckway in Whitehorse, Glenn Hagel from Moose Jaw and others announce their retirement from local politics. So have a number of hard-working and dedicated members of their respective city and town councils.

Let us stop for a moment and say, “Congratulations. And thank you.”

We don't say that to our politicians often enough. It is hard serving in public office. It is brutal getting elected—and many candidates try many times, suffering defeat after defeat. Some eventually get elected; some never do.

Elections at any level of government bring out the best and worst in people. For the candidates it is a particular difficult time. You—and increasingly, and shockingly, your family—are exposed and scrutinized as never before. The inspection and investigation of your life by media, or now by bloggers and social media, can be humiliating, difficult and hurtful.

Campaigning is exhausting. If you haven't been through it, trust me on this. It consumes you and leaves you utterly spent at the end of the campaign. Physically, mentally, emotionally.

You walk miles, spend hours shaking sweaty hands, get doors slammed in your face, are lied to constantly (if everybody who ever told me they were going to vote for me actually voted for me, I would have had landslide victories every time with 110% of the vote!) learn how to brace doors so that large, angry dogs don't come bursting through and devour your kneecap, watch in dismay as your carefully written and expensively printed campaign brochure gets tossed casually into the garbage—sometimes deliberately right in front of you--curse bitterly as kids or your opponent slash your campaign signs, and wake up fretting at 4am to check the headlines in the paper and listen to the morning radio shows to see who's slamming you today.

I ran four times and got elected four times. I also made a decision not to run again and to step away from politics. All of those decisions were really, really hard.

Unlike most other countries in the world, you don't run for a seat in Canada to get rich. In fact, especially at the local council level, the pay and perks are minimal and often cost people money (compared to what they could be earning in the private sector at that time of their careers).

You are constantly 'on'. I've had three meetings before I hit the lettuce counter at the local grocery store on a Saturday morning—none of them scheduled. You never quite get used to the phone calls at home at 10pm on a Sunday night from some angry constituent. The insults and comments about everything from your physical appearance to your IQ don't always roll off your back, although that's what everybody thinks.

Somehow politicians have become fair game as punching bags, the butt of all jokes, and a free shot from anybody with an email account.

Want to know something? It hurts. It hurts when your spouse cries at a vicious cartoon in the newspaper. It hurts when some lunatic talk show host babbles on about your voting record, not letting the facts influence his commentary. It hurts when some kid at school insults your kid over some political issue. It hurts when a headline misquotes you and causes controversy...funny how the later correction (and rare apology) doesn't get the same coverage or exposure.

Everybody says, laughingly, that you have to have a really thick skin to be in politics. That is certainly true. What nobody is asking is, why? How did we get to the point in our civilized society when there is the kind of animosity, anger, distrust and disrespect for people trying to do their best to serve their local community?

Oh sure, there have been lots of examples of elected people being stupid, dishonest, dumb and insensitive. Being elected doesn't imbue anyone with greater insight or intelligence. But most elected people most of the time are doing their very best to try to move the community and the country forward.

I worry deeply about how we're going to attract the next generation of politicians to run for public office. Smart, caring people who could make a huge contribution simply laugh at you and run away when you approach them about running for Council. They don't want themselves or their families exposed to the rigours of public life, and that's understandable. But shouldn't we be trying to figure out how to make public life one of pride and commitment again, something that is respected and looked up to?

We also need to say thank you for service when people step down (or the public makes that decision for them at election time), and congratulations for what you've accomplished. And for surviving. So to the many out there who won't be going back for another term on their local Council, thank you for your service, your dedication, your efforts to make your town or city a better place.