

Youth councillors bridge generation gap

A number of Manitoba municipalities have attempted to involve its young citizens in municipal leadership by adding the position of youth councillor to the municipal council.

One of the first communities to institute such a position was the Town of Arborg. In 1991, Mayor Bert Kindzierski appointed Grade 12 student Christine Hewlko to sit on the town council as an *ex officio* member. At the time, he said, "We're trying to get greater cooperation and greater input from our youth." Since then, 11 students have

followed Christine onto Arborg's municipal council. This year's youth councillor was Lauren Gislason.

Arborg's Chief Administrative Officer is Lorraine Bardarson. She feels the position is very effective at bringing the community closer together. "The young people, through their representative, feel more a part of the community and the council has a handle on the needs of area's youth. Everyone wins." Lorraine points out that the position of youth councillor has been added to the new *Municipal Act*.

As an *ex officio* member of council, the student councillor cannot vote on municipal issues, nor can he/she take part in an in camera session of council. However, the youth councillor is free to speak in the meetings and may bring forth resolutions affecting his/her constituents.

In the Town of Birtle, near the Saskatchewan border, the youth councillor provides an excellent liaison with the young citizens in the community, says CAO Joan Taylor. Joan adds, "The youth councillor will actually sit on various committees and is encouraged to take part in discussions."

According to Joan, Birtle has had "about six youth councillors to date." That includes this year's representative, Crystal Bonchuk. Crystal was kind enough to answer some of our questions for this story.

How would you describe this experience?

It has been very valuable. I would recommend it to other teens. You learn a lot being at council meetings.

Has this experience made you want to get involved in government as an adult?

Yes, it has a little.

If you had the power, how would you improve the role of youth councillor?

I'd improve it by getting the youth councillor more involved in the meetings and maybe show them how the planning works.

Do you have any advice for your successor?

Get as involved as you can.

Any last words for the Council?

I'd just like to thank the Birtle Town Council for allowing me to join their meetings for the past year.



Youth Councillor Crystal Bonchuk,
Town of Birtle (2003-04)

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