

## Part I – Women in Politics

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### Introduction:

*Take a look around your council table. Are the faces looking back at you all the same as yours? Is your council truly representative of the communities it is mandated to represent?*

*Unfortunately this is not always the case. While the very definition of democracy is the 'rule of the people by the people,' for years many groups of people in society were not allowed to vote, consequently not being given*

*an opportunity to have their views represented. While the right to vote has been extended to most groups in Canada, this has not necessarily resulted in an expected corresponding increase in participation by these groups in government. While there are certainly active political organizations that assert their representation of the views of many of these groups, all too often these groups of people have chosen to not participate within government.*

*While federal and provincial politics have seen varying increases in women, youth, aboriginals and minority groups standing for office, this has not necessarily translated to municipal politics. Perhaps more than ever, there is a need to have strong, inclusive municipal governments leading communities in order to face the increasing challenges that currently exist.*

*For this reason, over the next year leading up to the October 2006 municipal election, the Municipal Leader will run a series of articles aimed at providing suggestions on how to get more people involved in municipal politics. We begin the series in this issue with a look at how women can become more involved in local government.*

Women represent roughly half the population of Manitoba, yet when you leaf through the Municipal Officials Directory or look out into the crowded convention hall at an AMM event, it is clear that women don't make up half of municipal councils.

While the premise of the democratic system is that elected representatives are selected to represent a diverse group of people, the dialogue and discussion around the council chamber would certainly be strengthened by the inclusion of different voices and perspectives. There is no doubt municipal councils will be bettered through greater inclusion and increased diversity.

One of the biggest problems many municipal councils face is getting local people interested in the process. Often, it is hard enough to get anyone to run for office, never mind having the luxury to target specific groups of people. However, by challenging more women to become involved in the process, you can address both issues.

So how does a council encourage more women to become interested and involved in municipal politics?

There is a lot of attention being paid to getting women engaged in the political process, such as the *One Woman One Vote* initiative in Edmonton, *It's About Time* in PEI, or the *Femmes et Ville* (Women in the City) initiative in Quebec City. In 2002, Winnipeg played host to the 'See Jane Run' conference, co-sponsored by all three provincial political parties. The conference was organized by Manitoba women from various political backgrounds and encouraged women



to become actively involved in the political process, including as elected representatives. With over 150 women attending, the conference was a success.

At the national level, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) has taken a leadership role in exploring the challenges faced by women in municipal governments, recognizing that municipal government is “the order of government closest to citizens and, therefore, is in the best position to involve women in making decisions that concern their living conditions and make use of their knowledge and capabilities” (FCM, 2004). The FCM Canadian Women in Municipal Government Committee was formed in 1999 by a group of women and men with shared concerns about the challenges facing women in the municipal political spectrum. This committee has developed one-on-one mentoring programs for new women municipal officials, created an annual scholarship, and holds an annual forum on Women in Municipal Government at FCM’s Annual Conference.

As part of this initiative, FCM launched a one-year research project with the aim of contributing to changing municipal practices and policies to be more inclusive of women. This project took an in-depth look at women’s participation in local government, making many important discoveries. The Committee found that not only are women under-represented in most municipal processes, but that the reasons for this vary.

Many women felt that they had little information on municipal government, which was a serious obstacle to getting involved. Other serious barriers that were highlighted included a lack of working networks and relationships, municipalities not reaching out to involve women in the consultation process, as well as a lack of practical support for women, such as childcare, transportation and flexible meeting times. As well, those women that have become engaged in the political system in some way tend to stay outside formal political structures, such as municipal councils, feeling they can make a greater difference outside of the formal system. FCM found that many women feel their voice goes unheard when they have participated and that their participation does not lead to meaningful change.

The Committee also found that bringing women into the process strengthens municipal councils and develops a more collaborative style of governance, increases the knowledge base of council, and provides more and different leaders in the community. FCM also discovered that getting women engaged in the process and involved in the decision-making process often increases community support for municipal decisions.

## FCM resource kit

From this work, the FCM Committee created a resource kit that municipalities can use to attract more women to municipal politics. Building on the conclusions garnered from the research, the resource kit aims to provide best practices and examples of the successes some municipalities have experienced in their efforts to attract women to municipal councils.

The kit begins with a look at how to get the process started in your community. It then tackles the major barriers identified in their research, including such things as how to get more information to women in the community about what is happening with local government. The kit provides municipalities with insights into the knowledge barriers that exist. This includes even the most basic elements that

many already involved in the process may take for granted, such as what municipal government is responsible for, how do you contact your municipality, to more in-depth questions like how do you contribute to local committees, how do you make representations to council and what are my rights as a citizen? By providing useful suggestions on how to improve access to information, including using plain language, using existing community groups to help disseminate information, creating opportunities for local elected officials and women to meet to share information, and providing a guidebook for citizens, the toolkit gives municipal councils a starting place to build from.

So what can your municipality do to get women involved? Look at the FCM resource kit and use it. Think of ways to

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engage women in your community. Is there a local women's group? Talk to them. Are there ways to get women more aware of what council is working on? Find ways to get information out. Once you and your council understand the barriers that are preventing women from participating you can find ways to break these down. Most importantly, talk to women in your community and find out what the local impediments are and find ways to make the engagement process easier. Set a goal for the next election and strive to meet it. By increasing participation you will make your local council and community stronger.

### Did You Know?

- On March 24, 1916 Manitoba became the first province to give women the right to vote. It wasn't until two years later that the right to vote was gained nationally (Government of Canada).
- Nellie McClung predicted that within 50 years of obtaining the right to vote, women would comprise 50% of the legislative assemblies of the nation (Manitoba Historical Society).
- Women make up 52% of the population, yet only 21% of elected officials (FCM)
- Of 57 MLAs currently in Manitoba, only 13 are women.
- Edith MacTavish Rogers was the first woman elected to the Manitoba Legislative Assembly in the 1920 General Election (Government of Canada)
- Audrey McLaughlin, in 1989, became the first female head of a federal political party (NDP). Kim Campbell, in 1993, became the first woman Prime Minister in Canada (Government of Canada).
- October is women's history month.

### Websites:

- An overview of the 'See Jane Run' Conference  
<http://www.onewomanonevote.org/documents/SeeJaneRunWebsite.doc>
- Status of Women Canada  
<http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/>
- Women's Enterprise Centre  
<http://www.wecm.ca/index.html>
- Manitoba Women's Directorate  
<http://www.gov.mb.ca/wd/>
- Manitoba Women's Advisory Council  
<http://www.mwac.mb.ca>
- FCM Resource Kit  
<http://www.fcm.ca/english/policy/women.html> ♻