

Increasing diversity in municipal politics



The Summer 2005 issue of the *Municipal Leader* kicked off a special four-part series titled “Increasing Diversity in Municipal Politics.” The installments, which wrapped up with “Lessons learned” in the Spring 2006 issue, focused on ways to get more women, youth, and visible minorities involved in local government. At the time, we asked readers to take a look around their council table and ask themselves if their council is truly representative of the communities it is mandated to represent.

While the answer to that question would probably be “no” in most communities, we are definitely inching closer, particularly in the area of women in politics. With the recent provincial election resulting in a record 18 women in the Manitoba Legislature – at 32%, the highest percentage in Canada – it is not surprising that municipal council tables are following suit. And, as the association representing the 198 incorporated municipalities in Manitoba, the AMM board table is also beginning to reflect this trend.

Recently, our June District Meetings resulted in a fourth woman elected to the AMM Board. **Eileen Clarke**, Mayor of Gladstone now holds the seat of Midwestern Urban Director. She joins Town of Virden councillor **Maxine Chacun** (Western Urban Director); RM of Rosser Reeve **Alice Bourgouin** (Interlake Rural Director); and Town of Rosburn Mayor **Shirley Kalynuik** (Urban Vice-President). These four women represent 24% of the AMM board of 17. While this figure does not come close to reflecting the reality that women make up 52% of the population, it *does* exceed the national average of 21% of elected officials represented by women. Furthermore, it is double the number of women who sat on the board just two short years ago.

While women make up one facet of a diverse council or board table, people belonging to visible minorities are also not well represented. While it is difficult to give accurate figures for how many of Manitoba’s municipal officials identify as belonging to a visible minority, it is safe to say that most council tables do not reflect the strong multicultural mosaic that exists in many communities. The City of Thompson is one municipality where this is not the case, and **Oswald Sawh**, Councillor for the City of Thompson, was recently elected to the seat of Northern Director on the AMM board.

Born in Guyana in South America, Councillor Sawh moved with his family to Canada

at the age of six. First elected to Thompson City Council in 2002, Oswald says that he has never felt his skin colour was a barrier to his move into politics, and he has always felt a lot of support in the community. While his seat on the AMM board makes up 6% of the board, falling slightly below the 7.9% of Manitobans who identify themselves as belonging to a visible minority, it still represents a step forward towards diversity amongst current AMM directors.

“We wanted to give our youth the opportunity to have a say.”
Ernie Epp,
CAO, Town of Morden

There also appears to be substantial room for optimism in the area of youth in politics. Youth are indeed interested in improving their communities and affecting change, and here in Manitoba, *The Municipal Act* authorizes municipalities to appoint a youth member to sit with the council and participate in its deliberations.

We were fortunate to make the acquaintance of one such youth at the Central June District Meeting in Morden on June 12. **Bryton Moen** is a youth councillor for the Town of Morden. At 17 years of age, Bryton is serving a one-year term on Morden’s council, generally acting like a regular council member, albeit without voting privileges. “I’ve always been interested in politics,” he explains, “and when the position was advertised at school, I jumped at it.” Bryton, who will attend Brandon University this fall, even says that “this has been an excellent learning experience for me and has somewhat inspired me to major in political science.”



Bryton Moen, Youth Councillor, Town of Morden

The benefits have worked both ways. According to Morden CAO **Ernie Epp**, “We wanted to give our youth the opportunity to have a say. For example, we were planning to include a trade show booth in our local career symposium, and Bryton gave us some real insight into what to include, what not to include, and how to present it to our youth. And he was bang-on.”

The major requirements of being a youth councillor are that the individual must live in the municipality; must be under 18; and must make a one-year commitment. Moen has had no problem with the final requirement. According to Epp, “our next council meeting is the day before Bryton’s graduation, but he’s fitting it in.”

Manitoba’s municipal council tables may have a ways to go before they are truly representative of the communities they are mandated to represent. However, even in the two years since our “Diversity in Municipal Politics” series ran, strides have been made, both around local council tables and at the AMM board level. By increasing participation in municipal politics, our communities are indeed becoming stronger. ☺