

Municipal Profile

Three elected officials who identify as belonging to a visible minority shared their experiences in municipal politics: **Oswald Sawh**, Councillor for the City of Thompson; **Gladys Thorne**, Councillor for the Town of The Pas; and **Marlene Cook**, Councillor for the City of Selkirk.



Oswald Sawh – City of Thompson

Councillor Sawh was born in Guyana in South America. At the age of six, Oswald's family was sponsored to Canada and he lived in Winnipeg until work took him to Thompson at the age of 25. After being a member of his community for nearly a decade, Oswald decided he wanted to help his City expand its economic basis by becoming more involved in the community and he successfully ran for 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. The challenge he has felt has been working in a public arena with a speech impediment. Oswald has overcome this obstacle with his successful tenure as Councillor, and was Deputy Mayor in 2004.

Oswald states that a council should represent the demographics of the people. He is currently the only visible minority on Thompson's council, yet the City has a large First Nations population as well as a large youth population and they all need to be represented. He feels this can be done by showing people the benefits of engaging themselves in the system. Politicians at all levels need to continuously engage the public, and the City of Thompson works to address this through weekly question period sessions. These kinds of events help to keep people informed, as well as provide an opportunity to hear what residents have to say. Throughout it all, there is a need to communicate what and why things are being done, but also remaining open to new ideas.



Gladys Thorne – Town of The Pas

Gladys Thorne was first elected as town Councillor for The Pas in 2002. Currently the only female on council, Gladys is also the first and only First Nation to be elected to the Town's council. As a senior citizen with a physically disabled granddaughter, Gladys recognized that the perspectives of seniors and disabled individuals are often ignored, so she ran on a platform advocating for these two segments of the population. She says that her greatest accomplishment during her term was Live for Life, a program that provided access to the Town's change room and pool area for all citizens by moving the change rooms and putting a lift in the pool.

Gladys says that although her overall experience has been a good one, she acknowledges that, at times, it has been difficult trying to get her view across. She says that this may be because she is the only woman on council, but it may also be because as a new member, she is trying to figure out the process.

The Pas also has a large First Nations population, but this demographic is not equally represented on Council. The Mayor works closely with the First Nations however, and Gladys, who has lived in The Pas her entire life, says that she has seen an improvement over the years in how First Nations are treated and responded to.



Marlene Cook – City of Selkirk

Marlene moved to Selkirk in 1985 with her family at which time she began working and volunteering in her community. Her interest in politics was limited to complaining to family about the way things were running. When challenged by her dad, Marlene took the plunge and ran for City Council.

After losing her first bid, she persisted, and is now completing her second term. As a woman of First Nation ancestry, Marlene acknowledges that Council is not representative of the population of Selkirk, and she says that many people have told her that it means a great deal to them for her to be on Council. Marlene describes herself as being "very fortunate" to have this support from the people, however she notes that she does not believe skin colour is a barrier in her City. Rather, all community members are on equal footing.

Among many of the accomplishments Marlene lists during her tenure on Council are the new lights that have been installed near a school, work on the arena, and current work towards a skateboard park. Proud of her City's development and growth, Marlene adds that Selkirk needs a hotel to continue its expansion and support the use of the recreational centre. Wanting to work to see these tasks to completion, she is intending to run for a third term. Interested in increasing representation among the City's population, Marlene feels it is important to have youth involved and have a youth representative on Council.