

Young Manitobans MAKING WAY FOR YOUTH AT YOUR COUNCIL TABLE



“There is a simple way to find out what the youth in your community want. Ask them.”

— WAYNE KELLY, AMM ANNUAL CONVENTION, NOVEMBER 23, 2009

Most communities want one thing above all else, and that is growth. Growth represents vitality, wealth, health, diversity, and of course, income in the form of tax dollars. Especially at the municipal level, where we rely so heavily on property taxes, a growing community is considered a thriving community. Growth represents many challenges too, mainly in the form of strain on infrastructure and services, but overall, growth is seen as a positive, essential thing for community quality of life.

Given that, the out-migration of youth is a huge issue in many rural communities. A loss of our younger citizens represents a loss of some of that vitality, that freshness, and indeed, loss of growth. Our seniors are so important to our communities, but our youth are the future. They are future business owners, future home owners, and yes, future taxpayers. By finding out what youth want, municipalities can both encourage their young people to remain in the community or to return after they have spent time away doing other things.

One of the most obvious ways local councils can tap into the ideas and energy of youth – and find out what your community needs to do to encourage them to stay – is to appoint a youth member of council.

One community that has had an active sitting youth member for several years is the Town of Morden – they are on their seventh youth member, in fact! According to CAO **Ernie Epp**, the benefits are both for the individual as well as the organization.

YOUTH MAKING HISTORY

On November 4, 1992, history was made in Manitoba municipal politics as the first student was sworn in as a honorary councillor on the Town of Arborg council. In a ceremony at the Arborg Collegiate, **Christine Hewlco** was sworn in before the Minister of Rural Development at the time, **Len Derkach**, provincial government staff, parents, teachers, the RCMP, media, and the superintendent and trustees of the Evergreen School Division, along with the students.

Over the ensuing months, Hewlco attended all council meetings and presented monthly reports of students’ concerns. She even presented a resolution at the annual meeting of municipalities in April, 1993 in Thompson, addressing the issue of the high and sometimes prohibitive costs of students relocating to Winnipeg or other large centres to pursue post-secondary education. The resolution called for subsidies or grants to enable rural youth to aspire to higher education that many careers require.

Former Mayor **Bert Kindzierski** wanted to ensure the interests of local youth were articulated and represented in the town, and was instrumental in initiating this program. In a presentation at a 2003 Youth and Community Leadership Conference, Kindzierski explained how “having spent 24 years on town council, the last 15 years as mayor, I had given a great deal of thought on how we could get students from our high school involved and make them part of the decision-making process in our community.”

In the same presentation, Kindzierski had some suggestions for the future: “I believe the Province should be more involved if we want to have our youth be more involved. The Province should provide greater leadership in this area. AMM should be more involved and work with the Province to encourage participation. Student councillors could attend AMM regional meetings, seminars; even hold their own workshop...”

Kindzierski’s suggestions remain as timely today as they were in 2003, and his ideas as notable as they were back in 1992. For youth to become involved, council must first open the door.

- 1 | The individual gains experience in local politics, which looks good on a resume.
- 2 | There is a voice representing youth at the table. At times there are topics that are of real interest to youth, so the member can speak with peers and/or monitor what peers think of those topics.
- 3 | The exposure sparks interest in younger people regarding local issues, which helps ensure the entire population is involved.
- 4 | Long-term, it is hoped this program will lead to future local government leaders in politics. As a bonus, youth members are also expressing interest in careers in local government administration.

“It is a fantastic learning and growing opportunity, as it allows a student to enter the world of adults and be treated as an equal.”

– SHELISA KLASSEN, YOUTH COUNCILLOR, TOWN OF MORDEN

The last point is worth pondering for a moment. Have you looked around your council table lately? With a municipal election coming up later this year, some communities may experience a dearth of citizens coming forward to take on the responsibility. And the same holds true for CAOs. With many eligible to retire in the coming years, fostering interest in local government – either at the political or administrative level – can only help to ensure interest remains in these types of careers.

The Town of Morden’s youth member of council, **Shelisa Klassen**, says while she chose to become a youth member to get involved in the community, a budding interest in government was also a contributing factor. “I have always been really interested in how government works. I attended Forum for Young Canadians in March this last year and loved learning about the inner workings of federal government so I thought that I would enjoy learning about local government just as much.”

Klassen adds, “Some of the things I like about it are the fact that I get to be a representative of youth in the community, voicing what I think their opinions would be to council regarding certain issues. It is also interesting to learn about all the things that Town Council must balance in order to try and please as many people as possible.”

The Town of Arborg is currently on their 15th youth member of council, and in fact was the first municipality in Manitoba to include a youth member (see sidebar). CAO **Lorraine Bardarson** says the presence of a youth member is positive. “For most youth, this would be their first exposure to politics and its inner workings. It is an opportunity for students to gain an understanding of local government as well as raise their issues and concerns at the Council table – issues and concerns which council may not otherwise be aware of.”

Some councils may prefer to have a youth advisory committee or group charged with reviewing and bringing forward plans and proposals, rather than just one young person. Other jurisdictions have such groups, such as the Mayor’s Youth Advisory Committee in Burlington, Ontario. In such cases, the mandate of the existing group could be expanded. Another approach is that of the Village of Breton, Alberta (population 550). There, the Council comprising the mayor and four councillors also has not only youth advisors, but two senior advisors as participants in meetings. Now that is an inclusive council!


Gimli’s Youth Community Partnership (YCP), formed in 2006 and including about 30 members, is another good example. With support from Gimli’s Mayor and Council, the YCP appointed one of its members to municipal council as a youth representative. But it didn’t end there as other members of the YCP were named to the municipal recreation and environment committees. YCP has also been involved with the council in discussions around recreation issues, such as the proposed building of a skateboard park and the establishment of a new youth drop-in centre. In other words, council is not simply paying lip service to having youth representation – these youth truly are making their voices heard.

HOW TO INVOLVE YOUTH

Under the *Municipal Act*, a council may appoint a youth member to sit with the council and to participate in its deliberations, for a term and on conditions that the council may decide.

The only qualification is that the youth member must be less than 18 years of age or enrolled as a full-time student in a school. The youth member is not counted for the purpose of determining a quorum and is not a voting member; rather they are there to gain experience and to provide a different perspective to council.

Naturally, there must be positive spin-offs for the students involved, and Klassen sums those up by saying, “I definitely would recommend it to other students, especially those who are interested in government or helping their community, because it is a great way to feel like you are making a difference. It is also a fantastic learning and growing opportunity, as it allows a student to enter the world of adults and be treated as an equal. I have really enjoyed my experience so far as the youth member for Morden Town Council.”

Isn’t it time you invited a youth – or group of youth – to sit at YOUR council table? 

Sources:

Child- and Youth-Friendly Land-use and

Transport Planning Guidelines for Manitoba

Richard Gilbert and Catherine O’Brien January 15, 2009

www.gimliyouth.com/aboutus.htm

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