

Municipal association pushes for gender parity



RM of Reynolds reeve Trudy Turchyn, seen here at a meeting in Hadashville in March 2019, leads the only council in the Southeast comprised of more women than men.

by JORDAN ROSS

The association representing 137 municipalities in Manitoba wants to see more women on the ballot in 2022.

Last week, the Association of Manitoba Municipalities (AMM) launched a new section of its website devoted to advancing gender parity in local politics.

The page compiles reports, presentations, links, and other resources on women in government published over the past 10 years.

AMM president Ralph Groening said more resources will be added over the coming months.

The webpage stemmed from discussions last year between AMM executives and female reeves and mayors.

"This is our renewed effort to get the word out and identify some strategies that might be helpful to encourage us moving toward more gender equity," Groening said.

The page includes an Aug. 19 report prepared by AMM's federal counterpart, FCM (the Federation of Canadian Municipalities).

"Canadian women remain underrepresented at all levels of political leadership," the 15-page report found.

Across Canada, women hold fewer than 30 percent of elected positions in local governments.

In Manitoba, women secured 20 percent of available seats in the 2018 municipal general election, up from 17 percent in 2014.

In the Southeast, women won 16.8 percent of available seats in 2018. Two Southeast municipalities, Springfield and Reynolds, elected a woman head of council.

Seven local municipalities—Hanover, La Broquerie, Niverville, Montcalm, Stuartburn, De Salaberry, and the RM of Morris, where Groening serves as reeve—elected all-male councils in 2018.

Groening said rural politics in particular "have often, I think, been seen by women as unwelcoming."

"A lot of politics in rural Manitoba starts in coffee shops and sometimes, there hasn't been a fair venue and a fair opportunity for women to informally add their voice to the discussions," he said.

"I don't think it is a lack of interest. I think it is the avenues and the way in which municipal politics is managed or the way it's perceived."

In February, Groening travelled to Ukraine to discuss political and economic challenges facing municipal leaders there. Women identified a lack of adequate childcare as a barrier to political participation.

When the layer of government closest to the electorate doesn't reflect the electorate, Groening said communities pay the price.

"We need to hear the voices of all of Manitobans around the council tables," he said. "We need representation by women to provide their perspective on the decisions that we make."

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Groening said women offer an important perspective on a variety of municipal issues, from public safety to recreation, a point echoed in the FCM report.

"Through their involvement in community work and women's movements, local female politicians are better aware of issues faced by women in their communities and are uniquely positioned to address them," the report states.

In the 2022 election, Groening said the percentage of total candidates who are women rather than the number of women elected will be the best indicator of gender parity.

In the 2018 municipal election, 26 more women registered as candidates, despite 25 fewer seats available.

Over the next two years, Groening said each municipality should do what it can to create "an environment that easily allows for women to serve."

He suggested municipalities hold an open meeting where those considering running for office can ask questions and learn more about the job. Chambers of commerce and other organizations that develop local leaders could also participate.

More women in politics would also help address the shortage of candidates in some smaller municipalities. In the 2018 election three in 10 candidates ran unopposed.

The number of women in municipal politics could skyrocket if the province's chief administrative officers decide to pursue a council seat. According to Groening, a recent pay equity review carried out by the Manitoba Municipal Administrators' Association found 64 percent of CAOs in the province are women.

That's what happened in 2018 in the RM of Reynolds, where former CAO Trudy Turchyn was elected reeve. Four of seven ward council seats also went to women, something Turchyn said "quite surprised" her on election night.

Turchyn said she's glad to see municipal associations are promoting gender parity in local politics. She believes a gender-balanced council is a stronger council.

"The more variety you have at the table, you get a more rounded view."

Halfway through her first term in office Turchyn she hasn't experienced any gender-based discrimination. She said voters are focused on issues, not the identity of candidates.

The main barrier for women remains the time commitment involved, she surmised.

"Typically, (women's) time schedules are very limited because they are usually the ones getting the kids fed and taking them to their sports."

"Women have to juggle much more if they want to dedicate their time to municipal council."