

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: First Timers

First-Timers Seeking Municipal Office

By Stephen Somerville

Although the municipal election is not until this November, we already have two persons registered for the Councillor race. I certainly hope that we have a good number of people vying for one of the Council seats. Nothing against the current crop of municipal politicians, but having races is good for our democracy.

It also shows that we care about our community.

In 2006, three candidates sought the Mayor's chain of office while twenty of our fellow citizens contested the eight Council seats up for grabs.

In 2010 five candidates declared for Mayor while eighteen members of our community sought a Council seat.

I hope we have at least these kinds of numbers again!

Many trees have been felled in the study of democratic renewal and re-invigorating both our electoral process and our public institutions. There have been a myriad of reports, studies, focus groups and polling done on this issue.

But whether or not we have good government fundamentally comes down to the occupants of the elected seats.

We don't necessarily need to be governed by the best educated or by those with the highest incomes.

In fact, if you look at the experience of our contemporary leaders, they come from many different backgrounds. The current Prime Minister is an economist by training, while the last one was a millionaire businessman. The premier of Ontario was a former community organizer and facilitator while the premier of Alberta is a lawyer.

We do need, however, to elect people who represent and reflect the best qualities of our community.

We need people who truly are of our community, in our community and for our community. They need to put the Towns' interest ahead of their own narrowly defined self-interest. And the people we elect should have as their goal simply quality of, and selflessness of service, rather than longevity of service.

Our Council needs people from all walks of life, who have enthusiasm and energy to burn, and who, although possessing strong opinions are at the same time consensus builders, who work hard and get things done.

A couple of folks who are interested in seeking a Council seat asked me for some advice. My advice was simple. Get out and knock on some doors to hear what voters are thinking, but first spend some time producing a brochure that you can give to people.

This fall, when I am looking for someone to support, I begin the process by reviewing the brochures or simple pamphlets produced by the respective candidates.

I look for information on four broad areas; education, professional/vocational background, volunteer endeavors and accomplishments and the issues and answers that the candidate has identified as important.

We should be looking at the whole person. For instance, someone might not have much of a formal education, but their professional / vocational or volunteer accomplishments would make up for it. Or their stance on three or four important issues may be particularly compelling.

Regarding education: Do they have any post-secondary training? If so, in what area? Do they have any specialized knowledge, i.e. energy, public safety, health, social work, education?

What have they done in their private life? What type of career have they had? Do they belong to any professional organizations?

Have they participated in any volunteer activities? If so, for how long and in what capacity? Are they or have they been in the past a coach, referee or administrator for any of the local sports organizations?

If not presently a member of Council, have they attended any of the public Council meetings? Do they sit on any of the community committees? Are they part of any ratepayer group?

Have they taken the time to write letter(s) to the editor on a particular issue in the past? What was the issue that made them write?

And finally, what are the key issues that they are seeking office on?

The brochure does not necessarily need to be expensive or ornate, but it should be visually appealing to the eye and should attempt to provide a balanced view of the candidate.

For those who are seeking office for the first time, spend time on making the brochure/pamphlet a good one. For many candidates it is the first point of contact with the voting public, and as my mom always said, first impressions are important.

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