



Measuring  
Rural Community  
Vitality

# MUNICIPAL COUNCILLOR PROFILE

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INSTITUTE

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Rural Ontario Institute's recent exploration of municipal politics was inspired by the relationship between civic engagement and community vitality, where the combined energies, knowledge and skill of engaged residents are anticipated to fuel the engine of rural community wellbeing, or vitality. Formal political engagement, in this instance local government and municipal leadership, are thought to play an important role in fostering rural community vitality. This initiative has strived to shed light on this relationship. Key questions we sought to illuminate include:

- Q1:** Are we seeing participation in municipal politics from a diverse talent pool?
- Q2:** Are there sufficient candidates to foster a healthy, competitive environment in local elections?
- Q3:** Are candidates prepared for their positions, and are councillors able to effectively carry out their roles and responsibilities?

The Municipal Councillor Profile explored the demographic characteristics of municipal councils across Ontario, employing a province-wide survey of municipal councillors and the analysis of 2014 Ontario municipal election data. Understanding the demographic characteristics of municipal councils across Ontario helps to identify where gaps in representation currently

exist. Ontario municipal councillors are on average older, more predominantly male, less racially diverse, with higher incomes and more education than a typical cross-section of rural community demographics.

Gender and age emerged as two focal areas for further analysis, given the availability of data and the significant variances in each. 75% of Ontario's councillors and mayors are men, with men occupying 83% of the 'heads of council' positions. The median age for councillors and mayors is 60, relative to Ontario's median age of 40, with roughly 70% of councillors falling between the ages of 50 and 70 and only 9% falling between 18 and 40. When distinguishing age and gender by urban and rural geographies, these proportions remain consistent, indicating perhaps broader societal trends that transcend urban and rural geographies influencing representation.

Given these findings, what factors can explain this representation? To better understand the shared experiences and challenges facing rural councillors and mayors, we employed interviews and focus groups to gather their stories and perspectives. Voluntary interviews provided first-hand accounts of councillors' experiences running for election and their reflections on how their work environment might influence the integration of new councillors and individual decision-making of those considering public office. Clerks and CAO's were also interviewed to also gather their perspective on these aspects of councillor succession. Thus data on the

characteristics of unsuccessful candidates was scant. Some of the topics emerging in these conversations include:

- Councillors' perceived barriers to candidacy
- Opportunities for improving councillor training
- Strategies for improving councillors' working environments
- Strategies for encouraging civic engagement.

These conversations specifically examined where councillors and prospective candidates may face challenges, including running for council, councillor training, "learning the system", work-life balance, and managing relationships and conflict on council.

Women running for council have seen slightly higher success rates than their male counterparts though there remain significantly fewer total female candidates. Through the interviews it was identified that women experience many of the same challenges and hurdles facing the wider population, from family commitments to time management to building the necessary skills and expertise required to perform the duties associated with the job. However, additional societal challenges affect female participation in politics that might help to explain lower candidacy levels. Persisting gender stereotypes, a failure to socialize young women as leaders, insufficient mentorship/support networks and a conflict-laden working environment, are factors that may deter women from running. While all councillors have struggled with time

management and work-life balance, younger councillors are thought to be affected more strongly by these challenges given they may often have more demanding responsibilities outside of council (i.e. young families, less flexible and/or full-time jobs, additional financial burdens). Respondents young and old discussed a need for younger potential councillors to place a higher priority on maximizing income (relative to older peers) as they are in the prime earning years of their careers, often with more dependants. While there is a balanced debate on this issue, many councillors we spoke with feel municipal remuneration does not effectively compensate the time that is needed to be taken away from families and jobs, something that affects retirees less significantly. Family and occupational commitments and financial pressures are some factors that may deter younger councillors from running.

Finally, most respondents reported having struggled with learning how the municipal system works, learning their roles and responsibilities on council and managing conflict in the workplace. Many have felt unprepared coming in to their council positions, and have struggled to bring themselves up to speed, with some citing years of necessary on-the-job experience. Existing training has been cited as positive, though increasing access and uptake of available training is widely identified as an opportunity to improve the functionality of municipal councils. Greater pre-candidacy training, more rigorous ongoing professional development, formalized mentorship opportunities, and ensuring a positive council-staff relationship are all cited as important elements of creating an environment of learning and development, one that can in turn attract and retain high quality civil leadership. Finally,

encouraging an atmosphere of mutual respect amongst councillors, staff and constituents, is thought to be important in encouraging new candidates, facilitating more productive training and more effective councils.

Attracting younger candidates, female candidates, better preparing candidates and encouraging an atmosphere of mutual respect in municipal politics are all thought to be beneficial to the overall health of the municipal political system. Developing strategies to address these remains an ongoing conversation and will evolve over time as people come together to discuss these ideas. These collected statistics and stories provide an opportunity for various stakeholders involved in municipal politics to engage in meaningful dialogue around some of the issues affecting municipal government and municipal leadership succession.

# RATIONALE ▼

Civic-engagement through formal municipal politics is thought to be an important contributor to the vitality of rural communities.

A growing focus on community vitality in the field of community development stems in large part from a discontent with traditional economic determinants of growth and progress. This has led communities and academics alike to critically examine the idea of “vitality”, both in theory and practice, with a wide array of definitions and metrics for measurement emerging across different communities.

Community vitality attempts to describe the overall wellbeing of a community across a number of dimensions. Building on traditional economic indicators of growth, there is greater emphasis on a community’s quality of life, the health and happiness of its citizens, and its overall ability to sustain itself, not solely to grow.

From this perspective, a host of issues are potentially relevant to the discussion of vitality, including: collective action for collective benefit, civic engagement, public safety and respect for diversity, social and economic security, sustainable use of natural resources, welcoming and inclusive communities, innovative leadership, arts and culture, and attractive and accessible physical spaces.

Many have further examined the link between civic engagement and community vitality. For Katherine Scott (2010), community vitality can be thought of as the outcome of active engagement towards the betterment of the community, where citizens are engaged not only in the collective task of “getting by” but also of “getting ahead.”

The combined energies, knowledge and skill of engaged residents fuel the engine of community wellbeing (Scott, 2010).

Civic engagement, therefore, is a concept that helps us to understand the contributions of everyday citizens to community wellbeing or “vitality”. There are many differing understandings of what constitutes “civic-engagement”, ranging from volunteering, to activism to formal political engagement. This project has chosen to specifically address community engagement in municipal political leadership.

# PURPOSE AND SCOPE ▼

The Municipal Councillor Profile set out to document demographic characteristics of municipal councillors, perspectives on barriers to candidacy and stories of successful strategies for encouraging civic engagement.

This initiative has examined data from across Ontario, but has focussed specific attention on rural communities across Ontario. A better understanding of the demographic realities of rural municipal councils, and the challenges facing councillors, will identify opportunities for future action, and support efforts to improve municipal government operations.

In order to accomplish these project objectives, this initiative has three different components:

- 1 Demographic Snapshot: Primary and Secondary Data Analysis
- 2 Sharing Stories: Key Informant Interviews and Focus Groups
- 3 Implications and Priorities for Action: Convening Conversations

# METHODOLOGY ▼

This research is built on the collection of demographic statistics and aggregating individuals' thoughts and stories, and so has used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research techniques.

This research is built on the collection of demographic statistics and individual councillors' thoughts and stories. It has used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research techniques.

A survey was employed in partnership with Leanne Piper from the University of Guelph, to generate a profile of the characteristics of those gaining public office in rural municipalities across Ontario. The Ontario Municipal Elected Leaders (OMEL) survey targeted municipal councillors and mayors, looking at characteristics such as age, gender, educational attainment, racial identity, professional background, income, occupation and leadership training and development. This survey further refined demographic characteristics by urban and rural respondents. There were 606 total councillors and heads of council who responded to this survey. Of these respondents, 65% came from rural/northern communities, 32% from urban communities, and 3% reported being unsure. Secondary analysis of 2014 election data was used to gather data for all candidates, elected candidates, incumbency and acclamations. The results of both the survey and analysis of election data inform a "gap analysis"



## Survey Numbers

606

Councillors and heads of council responded to the survey (OMEL Survey)

100

RSVPs for participation in interviews and focus groups

30

Interviews

4

Focus groups

identifying under-represented demographics in municipal politics.

Invitations for participation in Interviews and Focus Groups were sent out to rural councillors, mayors, clerks and CAO's, and over 100 RSVP's for participation were received. From this list, 30 interviews were scheduled and 4 focus groups were carried out. These focus groups highlighted the perspectives of female councillors, young councillors, municipal staff, and a general mix of all councillors. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Groups were used to capture stories from councillors, mayors, clerks and CAO's with regards to their experiences in municipal politics and to explore any factors influencing the discrepancies observed in the demographic profile. Capturing and communicating these self-identified motivations for running, barriers to candidacy and self-identified deficits in councillor competencies, is intended to benefit provincial and municipal governments,

municipal education and training organizations, and other non-governmental organizations, in the development and targeting of training programs, outreach programs, mentorship programs and networking opportunities.

Part of communicating and sharing information generated through this initiative involves implications and priorities for action. An important component of ROI's ongoing mission is to catalyse dialogue, support a vision and provide a voice for rural Ontario. Convening conversations on the observations of this initiative will support ROI's ongoing mission and will contribute to a broader discussion of what can be done to better attract and support municipal councillors in rural communities across Ontario. To date, ROI has consulted with a number of organizations such as AMCTO, MAH, Samara Canada and Women In Politics, Thunder Bay, to discuss some of the findings and implications from this research.

## FINDINGS ▼

Ontario municipal councillors are on average older, more predominantly male, with higher incomes and more education than a typical cross-section of rural community demographics.

The data for the demographic snapshot came primarily from the OMEL Survey, with some coming from the analysis of 2014 municipal election data.



### Gender

There is a significant imbalance between male and female representation on municipal councils. In rural Ontario, 75% of municipal councillors and mayors are men, and 25% are women. Urban councils are slightly less balanced, with 77% male councillors and 23% female councillors. Across the province of Ontario, 75% of municipal councillors and mayors are men and 25% are women. Additionally, 83% of the Heads of Councils are men while only 17% are women. Interestingly, female candidates actually outperformed their male counterparts in election campaigns, with a success rate of 43% relative to a male success rate of 37%. This suggests that a discrepancy in overall candidacy by gender can account for the underrepresentation of women. 77% of total candidates in 2014 were men and only 23% of candidates were women.



### Demographic Numbers

75 | 25  
% men | % women

Ontario municipal councillors and mayors

60 | 61  
rural | urban

Median age of rural municipal councillors and mayors

47 | 58  
% rural | % urban

Municipal councillors and mayors who have completed University level education

2%

of rural municipal councillors contacted through the OMEL survey self-identified as being a visible minority

62 | 25  
% returning candidates | % new candidates

Success rate

18 of 19

Ontario municipalities where all candidates were acclaimed in 2014, came from Northern Ontario



## Age

The majority of councillors and mayors are within 50 and 70 years of age. The median age of municipal councillors and mayors is 60 in rural communities and 61 in urban communities. The Provincial median age is 40. No further data is currently available on the age of candidates running for election.



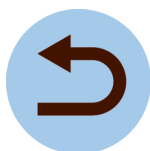
## Education

There is a greater proportion of University educated individuals on municipal councils than there is in the general population of Ontario. 51% of municipal councillors and mayors have completed a university level education compared to 30% of Ontario's population. Additionally, 58% of urban councillors and mayors have completed University level education, compared with only 47% in rural communities. No further data is currently available on the education of candidates running for election.



## Income and Occupation

46% of municipal councillors and mayors across Ontario earn more than \$50,000 annually, compared to 27% of Ontario's population in this income category. By extension, only 54% of municipal councillors and mayors across Ontario earn less than \$50,000 annually, relative to 73% of Ontario's population with income below \$50,000. No further data is currently available on the income and occupation of candidates running for election.



## Incumbent, Acclaimed, Uncontested

Incumbents, or returning councillors, had a distinct advantage over new candidates in this election, with a success rate of 62%, relative to new candidates' success rate of 25%. 14% councillor positions in 2014 were acclaimed, meaning that 14% of the total municipal elected officials saw no challenging candidates. Furthermore, 19 municipalities across the province saw elections where all candidates were acclaimed and of those 19 municipalities, 18 were located in Northern Ontario. 78% of total acclaimed councillors were male and 22% were female.



## Racial and Ethnic Diversity

According to the census and National Household Survey for Ontario, 26% of Ontario's population have self-identified as a visible minority. Of those urban municipal councillors contacted through the OMEL survey, visible minorities represent only 4% of councillors, and among rural Ontario respondents 2% of total councillors self-identified as being a visible minority. In the development of the workplan for this initiative, the racial and ethnic composition of councils was thought to be an interesting area for inquiry. However, due to the data available and the responses we received for participation through interviews and focus groups, this aspect was scoped out of the current project. Currently no data exists identifying the number of visible minorities running for election. Racial and ethnic diversity is a broader issue facing rural communities across Ontario, especially given the increasing pressure for many communities to attract and retain newcomers in order to balance population decline. There is likely a role for municipal councils to play in fostering welcoming and inclusive rural communities. The connection between racial and ethnic representation on municipal councils and newcomer attraction is an important area for future research.



## Urban/Rural

Given the data stemming from the OMEL survey and the 2014 municipal election data, it was found that there are not significant differences in the demographic composition of urban municipal councils and rural municipal councils. Rural municipal councillors have slightly higher levels of education, earning slightly higher annual incomes, however the representation across age, gender and race are very close to the same. This is an interesting insight into the municipal council role – if there is similar representation from urban to rural on municipal councils, perhaps there are factors that transcend these geographic boundaries influencing candidacy rates amongst different demographics.

## Demographic Snapshot Summary ▼

Given the demographic structure of municipal councils across Ontario, questions for further discussion included:

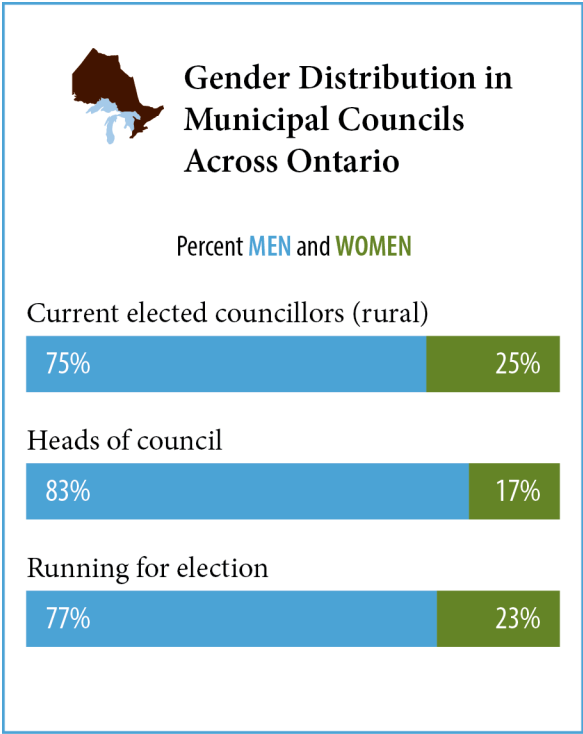
- Why are there such fewer women than men, both elected and running for council?
- What is at the root of the age discrepancies?
- Why do we see more retirees and part-time employees, relative to those employed full-time?
- Why are councillors generally more educated than Ontario's population writ large?
- Why are visible minorities not more highly represented on municipal councils?

In order to shed light on some of the emerging trends observed through the demographic survey and analysis of election data, these questions, and more, were posed in the interviews and focus groups with Councillors, Mayors, Clerks and CAO's. The resulting discussions largely centred on perspectives surrounding age and gender. However, beyond these two demographic categories, the interviews and focus groups also looked to better understand concepts around new councillor preparedness, common experiences and challenges for all councillors, some of the issues impacting the healthy functioning of municipal governance, and overall strategies for improvement. The specific rural context of municipal councillors was also explored further through interviews and focus groups, drawing from exclusively rural participants.

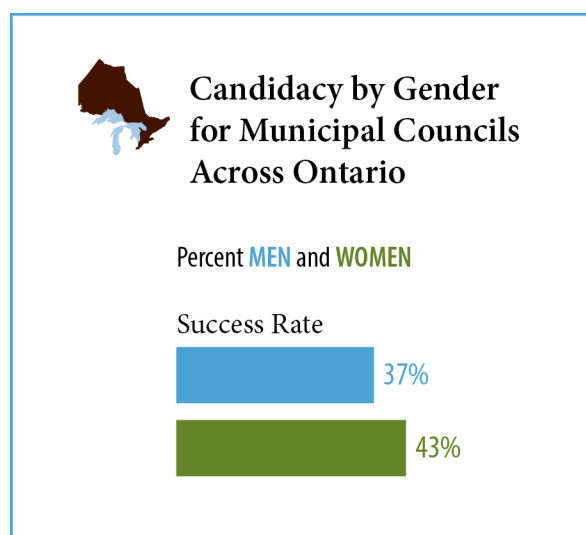
# WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ▼

There is a significant gender imbalance on municipal councils across the province of Ontario, with only 25% of councillor and mayor positions occupied by women. Additionally, only 17% of heads of council are women. In rural Ontario, 75% of municipal councillors and mayors are men, and 25% are women, whereas urban councils are slightly less balanced, with 77% male councillors and 23% female councillors

This trend is consistent across Canada as well. The national average in 2010 for female representation on municipal councils, including provinces and territories, was 24% (FCM, 2010). Today in 2015, the national average of female councillors and mayors is slightly improved, sitting at roughly 27% (FCM, 2015).



While women running for council have in fact seen slightly higher success rates than men running for council, there remain significantly fewer female candidates. This imbalance in overall candidacy is the driving factor for the underrepresentation of women, and begs the question, why are such fewer women running for councillor and mayoral positions?



Women experience the same challenges and hurdles on council facing the wider population, from family commitments to time management to building the necessary skills and expertise required to perform the ongoing duties associated with the job. However, through interviews and focus groups, there have been additional factors identified that may better explain female participation in politics.

What needs to change comes from the idea of socialization: what do we see as roles for women relative to men? As long as we think a woman is abandoning her family and a man [is] serving [his] community, we will continue to see these lower numbers for women.

With a trend that has persisted over a number of elections, it becomes evident that women's underrepresentation on municipal councils is not statistical chance or a generational issue, but rather broader societal forces affecting female candidacy. Some of the most common issues identified through interviews and focus groups for women in politics include: a lack of socialization as leaders, too few female role models, a lack of self-confidence and an ongoing negative working environment.

"For me, it is about gender. It's that subconscious thought that 'I can't be on council. That's not what Council looks like.' And really, that was my knee-jerk reaction. It's important to change what that picture looks like."

Some female councillors we spoke with believe young girls are not encouraged to take charge and take on leadership roles in the same way as young boys. Where boys might become more comfortable with addressing conflict at a young age, they are thought to be in turn more comfortable running for municipal council.

Fewer women in municipal leadership roles equate to fewer role models to inspire younger women, and this can in turn affect a women's confidence in running for election. Many women look at existing councils, and given their demographic structures these women do not see themselves succeeding in this position. Further, as municipal councils are often a male-dominated environment, some women feel intimidated to get involved. A negative work environment, following from ongoing conflict, public scrutiny, persisting gender stereotypes and overt sexism, is cited as a common struggle for

female councillors, and a deterrent for many of their female friends and colleagues.

"I think oftentimes what it takes – what it took for me – is someone tapping you on the shoulder and saying, 'you have the skill set for this, and we need a strong candidate in this area.'"

The current underrepresentation of women perpetuates many of the issues identified above. If young women don't see opportunity for themselves in municipal politics, if they don't have female mentors who can reach out and support them, it remains a significant challenge to encourage greater participation in the future.

"I belong to a really interesting women's network that's been meeting since 1986. It sprang up primarily because we couldn't join Rotary at the time and there were a number of businesswomen who wanted a way to meet. But then it evolved – it didn't matter if you were a businesswoman, if you were home, whatever. It's now essentially a support group, a mentor group. We come from all ends of the spectrum politically, personally, by age, whatever. These women are an important sounding board and you need that kind of network around you. You can't do it alone."

"One of my ideas is to encourage AMO and Ontario Small Municipalities to have an active women's caucus, to not only support the women already elected but to encourage those organizations to find ways to mentor other women and support them in running and being successful. It would be a women's caucus for leadership and mentorship and could take many forms. I think there's something really powerful in bringing people together to talk about their life experiences."

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Profile more prominently female role models in municipal politics
- Encourage peer to peer mentorship and networking amongst women
- Actively recruit more women for all levels of municipal governance (candidates, committees, volunteers)
- Encourage implementation of a collective "code of conduct" review at council

# YOUNGER MUNICIPAL COUNCILLORS ▼

There is a distinct age discrepancy on municipal councils, with a median age of 60, relative to the median age of 40 across Ontario. According to the OMEL survey, 69% of councillors fall between the ages of 50 and 70 (+/- - 10 years of the median age) and only 9% fall in the youngest age bracket, those between the ages of 18 and 40. Younger councillors are understood, for the purpose of this report, to be under the age of 40.



## Age Discrepancy in Municipal Councils Across Ontario

### Median Age

Municipal Councils: 60

Ontario 2011 Census: 40

### Percent of Councillors

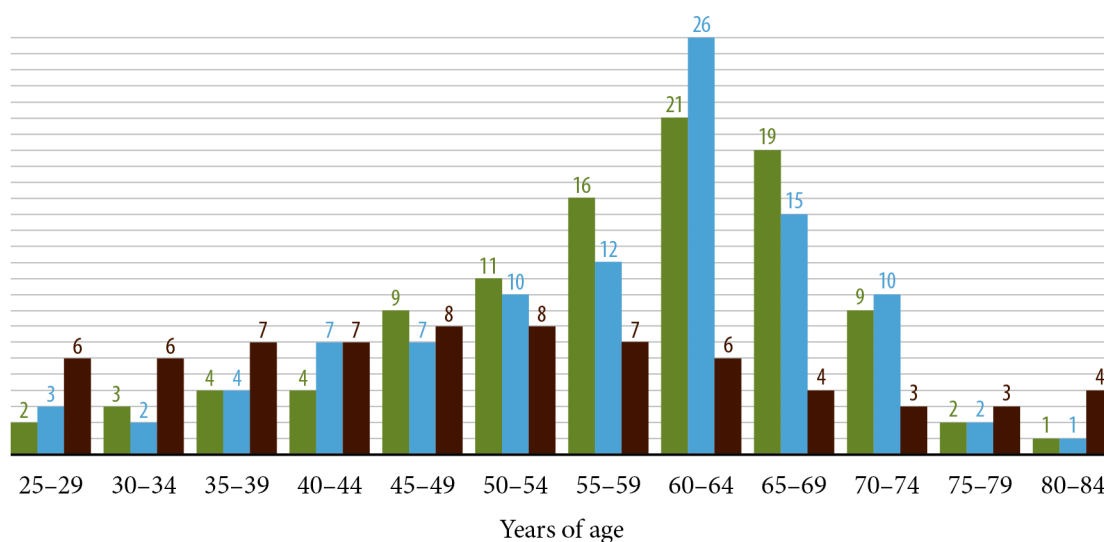
18 to 40 years of age: 9%

50 to 70 years of age: 69%



### Age distribution of Ontario's municipal councillors (2015) relative to the Ontario Census (2011), by age

Percent of **RURAL municipal councillors**, **URBAN municipal councillors**, and **ONTARIO CENSUS** in each age category



"I was definitely not represented in my own community, so that was the driving force behind [running for election]. I was young, had two kids at the time, and I was not represented on council at all."

For many, this age discrepancy is seen as inevitable, stemming from the overall nature of the work and the relative life situations for older and younger councillors. Daytime meetings during regular working hours, weekly hours of

work and minimal remuneration meet young families, full-time jobs and new mortgages. The job of municipal council, for many, is not seen as a "young person's sport".

"It is not a young person's sport from a time commitment point of view. I would love nothing more than to quit my day job so that I could do this again to the fullest of my capabilities, but I have a pension, and at [under 50] I'm not in a position where I could walk away from a pension."

"Because it's a part-time job, most of the work takes place between the time when you come home from your day job and the time your kids go to bed. And you never get that time back. So if you have a young family, the worst thing that can happen is you either rob your family to do the job, or you rob the job to do right by your family."

Most would agree that younger councillors, bring fresh new ideas to the table and, while not a universal truth, younger councillors are seen to better represent the evolving needs of younger families in rural communities. It is widely regarded as important to attract and retain younger people to the municipal system, as these are thought to represent future leaders for rural communities across the province.

Councils with a majority of longstanding incumbent members, re-elected over a number of terms, are seen by some to hold communities back as councillors can become averse to change and restrict the adaptation that is necessary to meet evolving needs and opportunities. Some have called these councils "stagnant".

Conversely, young councils, or particularly new councils arising from high turnover in an election, can equally pose challenges for municipal governance as councillors may find themselves re-inventing the wheel and revisiting old mistakes. While younger councillors are seen

as important contributors, the value older councillors bring to the table includes things such as: corporate knowledge of local decisions, mentoring of new councillors, and overall life experiences that guide decisions. Given these observed dynamics stemming from councillors' age and experience, recognizing the role that both old and young councillors can play in supporting one another is seen by many as important to ensuring healthy succession of municipal leadership and council operations.

"There are a lot of older people in the process. What happens there is that you don't get the views of young families. The young families do different things in your community, they're involved in different recreational programs and different things are important to them. Senior retired people have their own important issues. It's certainly important to get a good cross-section of your constituents represented by the various age groups."

"Young thinking doesn't necessarily mean better thinking... It is a little bit ageist to say old people don't want to do anything for the community. It's not about the age but what the whole community, and staff, want to move forward with. It's not [only] about getting the younger people involved, it's about getting the right people involved."

Municipal council is not the first instance of community engagement for a majority of currently elected councillors we spoke with. Attracting young councillors, and all councillors, requires introducing them to council in various ways, through education and exposure to various volunteer committees. The underlying goal is to show a new generation the value of municipal politics, teach them the process for getting involved and foster their confidence in making the decision to run for election. By attracting more people to run for council, it is thought there will be more healthy competition for these positions, and councils will be drawing on a wider talent pool for future candidates.

"It goes back to getting people in touch with their community and knowing what's going on. Once people start to know how things work and understand where they can get involved to help their community, I think they'll be more likely to take that next step and run for council or volunteer for a committee, or whatever it is."

"As you get them involved, and you give them responsibility, they feel that they're welcome and accepted and they bloom. My son was our fair ambassador for the agricultural society – he was even the home craft president on our fair board at the age of 16. The older people respected him, and there you go. That's the key, is getting that respect from older people. And for some of them that's a hard thing to grasp. It's hard for the older ones to let go."

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Profile more prominently young role models in municipal government
- Start small: get youth involved in the community in different ways ex: Junior Farmers, 4-H, school council
- Deliver greater education/ outreach programs around municipal government with local schools

# CHALLENGES FACING ALL MUNICIPAL COUNCILLORS ▼

While there are certainly many challenges unique to different age groups or genders, there are nonetheless inherent challenges all councillors face in running for election and in fulfilling expectations.

From what we have heard, these common challenges affect different demographic groups in different ways. While factors like role models, self-confidence, negative work environments, time management, remuneration and incumbency advantage, may have a greater impact on younger or female candidates, at the end of the day, they affect all councillors in different ways.

Role models and self-confidence are important to many councillors, regardless of gender. Family histories in municipal politics or prior community involvements have been common amongst many councillors. These family role models can be important precursors to a future councillor's decision to run for election. Similarly, many councillors, not only women, identified confidence as an important facilitator to getting involved, something that can come through leadership programs, skills and experience, or prior community involvements, to name a few.

It takes a fair amount of self-confidence to stand up in front of a community and say, "this is what I stand for, and I want you to vote for me". Because when people don't vote for you, it hurts.

While it is often an issue that affects younger councillors more significantly, most all councillors also point to the challenge of time management, and balancing personal and professional commitments with their council duties. Young or old, everyone has priorities outside of council. As a result, something we have seen through the data that illustrates this struggle is that many councillors who make this position work have flexible or part-time work arrangements and a majority of councillors are retired.

Incumbency advantage is something that affects all new candidates contemplating running for election. Of the candidates actually running for election (not acclaimed), 30% were incumbents and 70% were new candidates. With a 62% success rate for incumbents (compared to a 25% success rate for new candidates), 52% of the actively elected candidates were incumbents in the election. This is discouraging to many potential candidates who see running for election as a futile effort, and could contribute to the numbers of acclaimed councillors (uncontested in the election) we see in many jurisdictions. As 74% of incumbents were also male, there is a significant electoral advantage for men, stemming from the historic composition of municipal councils. I would hypothesize similar trends exist across age discrepancies, racial discrepancies, and economic discrepancies, to name a few. Incumbency advantage thus mitigates any shift in councils' demographics by perpetuating existing demographic structures.

"You couldn't run against this mayor anyway – it's his full time job. He's been in municipal politics for years and he's been a good old boy from the beginning."

Something that affects all councillors equally, regardless of demographic characteristics, is councillors' relative preparedness for fulfilling council duties. Despite the training that currently exists, many councillors report feeling underprepared for their new roles and responsibilities on council, from managing a budget, to interacting with the public, to understanding the complexities of conflict of interest legislation. While the existing training is largely touted as useful and effective, accessibility to, and a lack of interest in the available training

is a common issue. Mandatory pre-candidacy training, broad public education, and mentorship opportunities are all identified as potential strategies for improving the current state of affairs. Many councillors have reported relying more heavily on informal learning opportunities (mentorship, personal reading and learning "on the fly") in order to learn the ropes with regards to their roles and responsibilities on municipal council.

"I have a solid business background. I have an MBA. And I had dealt with government at the provincial and the federal level. So I thought I was fairly well-acquainted with what it took to be a councillor. Like most people, I think, who get elected for the first time, I quickly found out that I did not know as much as I thought I did."

"For the first two years you are useless. You're learning how this whole thing works. Not to say that you don't have any good ideas in those first two years, but you're pretty much useless until you figure out how it all works."

A fundamental part of the municipal system is conflict – councillors come together as a group to discuss different issues affecting their community and make decisions to determine the appropriate actions to for the municipality. Many councillors, male and female, have spoken about the challenges associated with a negative work environment on council. Relationships and interactions with constituents, fellow councillors and municipal staff have all created negative experiences and at times quite hostile working

environments. While this is a reality that affects candidacy for both genders, many have suggested this is a particular deterrent to potential female candidates.

“The odds of me running again are not good by the way – it’s damned unpleasant in a lot of ways.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement public education campaign: improve collective understanding of municipal government
- Encourage implementation of a collective “code of conduct” review at council
- Foster additional and ongoing mentorship and networking opportunities amongst councillors
- Improve/expand existing pre-candidacy training and new councillor training

## PRIORITY ACTION AREAS ▼

### Candidate Attraction ▼

Attracting candidates from a wide talent pool has been identified as an important element of healthy local democracies, where not only new talents and skills can be leveraged, but new perspectives, experiences and fresh ideas can be uncovered.

Greater participation in municipal politics also brings healthy competition, decreasing rates of acclaimed councillors and providing additional choice to the electorate. There have

been a variety of suggestions for developing greater participation or candidacy in municipal politics across the board, by age, gender, race or socioeconomic status.

### Collect more robust data for all municipal candidates across Ontario ▼

Collecting more robust data for all municipal candidates contributes in a number of ways to the challenges discussed throughout the Municipal Councillor Profile. Collecting information from all registering candidates through a mandatory survey would provide absolute numbers for various demographics represented both in candidates and elected officials. This would identify underrepresented groups needing future attention and allow different regional organizations/programs (like Women in Politics) to assess the local or regional impacts from

election to election of the various activities and programming they have been implemented. While existing data indicates gender, acclaimed and incumbent councillors, additional information could easily include age, occupation, education, income and racial identity. More detailed qualitative information could also be gathered through a more detailed survey, asking for example about motivations for running or previous experiences that have prepared them to run.

## Identify and build on existing candidacy programs ▼

Municipal clerks currently are responsible for administration of local elections, however programming focussing on attracting candidacy risks placing them at odds with any incumbent councillors running for election. The challenge then is to identify who carries this torch and takes responsibility for candidate attraction initiatives. Currently programming exists and is doing great work, though there is an opportunity to better integrate some of the strategies being used and to communicate the various opportunities more widely. Youth programming like Municipal Youth Councils, Local Government Week, FCM's Municipal Youth Engagement Handbook and The Emerging Municipal Leaders Forum at OGRA/ROMA are making great strides with engaging young leaders in municipal politics. There may, however, be more work being done by individual clerks, or civic associations, for example, that goes unrecognized. Programming supporting women's participation in municipal government

is also doing important work, though various organizations like Women In Politics – Thunder Bay, Women and Politics – London and FCM's Women in Local Government, are not communicating amongst themselves and sharing their experiences. There is a missed opportunity in not sharing existing strategies and lessons learned for candidate attraction. As these regional organizations would not be competing with each other, there is a great opportunity to build capacity and strengthen their impact by coming together in a seminar to share experiences – successes, challenges and new ideas. A seminar like this could focus on candidate attraction more generally as youth and women, for example, share similar challenges. Seminars like this could inspire broader leadership & capacity building programs in the future. Establishing who takes responsibility for candidate attraction is a significant challenge warranting further discussion and brainstorming.

## Foster Mentorship and Networking Amongst Future Leaders ▼

Building social capital and personal networks can in turn build the confidence needed to run for council, particularly for currently underrepresented demographics. A strong network of future leaders is thought to be important to the overall resiliency of the municipal system. Mentorship has been widely acknowledged by councillors, mayors, clerks and CAO's as an important element for both training councillors and encouraging candidacy. Many candidates have identified needing a friendly push to run for election, from a trusted colleague who has been there and understands the system.

Further, the advice and knowledge that can be passed along has proven crucial to instilling self-confidence in potential candidates. More widespread networks of mentors could provide these functions to greater numbers of highly qualified potential councillors. As mentorship is currently unofficial and informal, there is an opportunity to improve access to mentorship opportunities. Formal networking events with existing councillors from within a community or across a region can help establish some of these important social connections.

## Public Education & Social Marketing: Encourage Small Steps ▼

A widely agreed upon strategy for encouraging candidates is to focus on encouraging a variety of local community engagement opportunities. Most councillors acknowledged that their own civic engagement did not begin with running for council – that they have been involved in a number of different community organizations or projects prior to their decision to run for council. It is widely thought that engaging citizens in municipal committees and within the broader local community (and youth in particular) in meaningful ways is an effective

strategy for developing future leaders. Engaging more people from various backgrounds in smaller community projects or organizations is integral to demonstrating the value of getting involved in the community, and breeding the confidence and experience for people to run for council. Providing positive first experiences with civic engagement, where people can experience positive results and see the value in their participation, is integral to fostering future engagement and collective action.

## Councillor Preparedness ▼

### Improve/Expand Pre-Candidacy and New Councillor Training ▼

Overall preparedness and training for new and old councillors, is an ongoing challenge. Many councillors report being underprepared for their roles and responsibilities within their communities, despite the training that currently exists. While the existing training is largely touted as useful and effective, accessibility to, and a lack of interest in, the available training is a common issue. Whether participation in training is affected by council budgets, time constraints

or a general disinterest, there is opportunity for improvement. Training specifically tailored to the local context is especially important for many councillors, as it provides important local context, and is more engaging than other more high level content. Sorting out who is responsible for what types of training is a challenge but it is widely acknowledged that fostering positive relationships between staff and council is important to getting effective place-based training.

### Make common educational resources available for all clerks ▼

A number of training programs exist for new councillors and for hopeful candidates, however due to time constraints or budgets, many of these training opportunities are not being attended. Equipping clerks with common educational materials for a variety of training needs will decrease their workload at election

time, and allow them to spend more time tailoring information to the local context and promoting participation in these opportunities. A common pool of resources would ensure a more universal level of training across Ontario, despite communities with varying availability of resources.

### Encourage informal mentorship ▼

On council mentoring: Further, the accumulated wealth skills, experience and historical knowledge of our rural communities, shared by long-standing or retired councillors, are important assets that could be better leveraged to support the preparedness of current and future

councillors, and help build stronger councils across the province. Maintaining corporate knowledge is a challenge all councils face, given the possibilities of high council turnover during an election.

# Council Working Environment ▼

## Establishing Common “Aspirational Values” on Council ▼

Fostering an atmosphere of respect is another challenge conducive to developing greater candidacy rates, but also important to strengthening overall council operations. Many councillors cited a negative working environment as either a reason they will be leaving municipal politics next term, or as a deterrent for fellow colleagues from running in the first place. Conflict between councillors and staff, councillors and constituents and amongst fellow councillors, are commonplace, and if conflict is not managed properly, it can be destructive for individuals and for councils. Thus building an atmosphere of mutual respect is important, not only to the healthy day-to-day functioning of municipal councils, but for attracting new candidates for the long-term health of the municipal system.

One specific suggestion is the mandatory development or review of a code of conduct for council operations. Another suggestion is more widespread public education around the roles,

responsibilities and capacities of municipal councillors and mayors. There are however, no simple immediate solutions to this, as it is a cultural shift that will take time. Suggestions include a mandatory code of conduct review that would allow all voices to be heard and remove any intimidation for individuals who are outnumbered on a council. A collective process of defining values may ensure greater buy-in from councillors relative to an imposed set of rules. Facilitators should encourage stronger emphasis on decorum, respect and civility in future council dialogue.

Another specific suggestion is a public education campaign that encourages greater public respect for the council role through an increased understanding of their responsibilities and capacities as indicated in provincial legislation. This campaign may also lead to greater candidacy levels as people may then see an opportunity for themselves in their local municipal council.

## CONCLUSION ▼

Found throughout the Municipal Councillor Profile final report, there are likely a number of commonly known statistics and stories that have emerged, with trends perhaps not significantly different from those observed in other levels of politics or spheres of society. There are likely other statistics and stories still that have, to date, gone unnoticed and have yet to be told.

*It is the intention of this report and this overall initiative to bring together the demographic realities and shared experiences of municipal politics in rural Ontario as understood through the eyes of councillors, mayors, clerks and CAO's.*

From a common ground of understanding emerges an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue around some of the issues affecting our municipal governments – those governments closest to the people, responsible for so many of citizens' day-to-day needs.

Municipal leadership succession is influenced by broad societal trends, from the socialization of

our youth, to persisting gender stereotypes and expectations, to the educational system and the attention it places on acquainting us with local, provincial and federal governments. Municipal leadership succession is also influenced by individuals' own situations, from their stage in life and those associated responsibilities, to their understanding of municipal government and their own sense of their capacities.

It has been shown that rural Ontario's municipal councillors are on average older, more predominantly male, with higher incomes and more education than a typical cross-section of rural community demographics. Further, councillors face challenges in learning how the municipal system works, understanding their roles and responsibilities, while managing conflict amongst fellow councillors, constituents, and staff.

Indeed, there are many factors that affect one's decision to run, and one's ability to excel as a municipal councillor or mayor. In identifying where obstacles exist, and challenging some commonly accepted ideas in municipal politics, there lies a collective opportunity to improve; this is not to suggest the system is broken, or that individuals are not fulfilling their responsibilities, rather an honest attempt at pushing the envelope and moving the bar forward.

# QUOTES ▼

## Getting Involved

"I often encourage people to get involved in their community politics because I think there's no other level of government that has this much say in our daily lives and that could make more of a difference than municipal politics."

"It should be about community service – not a job. Nobody is doing this on the municipal side for money. You'll starve."

"So when I retired and we moved up here full time, it was a motivation to see how I could give something back to the community. It was definitely a way of getting involved in some form of helping the community. Typically people up here get involved in hospital boards or local politics – there aren't too many choices."

## Confidence

"The standard line is, 'I want to give back to the community' and that sort of thing. But I think anybody involved in politics, you have to have a healthy ego. I don't necessarily mean that in a negative way. It's really probably no different than the ego that a performer has to have. It takes a fair amount of self-confidence to get up on a stage and try and entertain people. And likewise it takes a fair amount of self-confidence to stand up in front of a community and say, 'this is what I stand for, and I want you to vote for me.'"

"Junior Farmers gave me the confidence to run. Through junior farmers I've been able to chair different committees, serve as president of our local club and serve as the current provincial director. I've been able to use those experiences to learn how to deal with people in that context."

## Underprepared Councillors

"I felt comfortable that I could do the work. But if you'd asked the question, did I know what the work was, no, I would have said I thought I did but once I got in here I realized it was quite different."

"I don't think they are fully prepared, I don't think they are prepared at all for day one- from knowing the internal policies and procedures that are already in place, the hundreds of by-laws that currently exist, the history of past decisions and those simple things like Robert's Rules of Order. Orientation for us is still on-going even 6, 7, 8 months into it now. They are still learning the ropes and making multi-million dollar decisions without really any knowledge. So it's tough for them."

## Role Models

"The night of the election we were at town hall and my girls came with me, and when I won, my youngest daughter said to me "Mom, girls can do anything can't they" so I go back to that all the time when things get tough or when personal attacks saying, oh she doesn't know what she's doing."

"I was born and raised in a political family. My father served on the school board when I was growing up, and was heavily involved in the community. I saw that as an example. I had a background in 4-H and junior farmer and as a rural farm girl that immediately gets you involved in things. So I've always, sort of been taking leadership roles."

"My grandfather was a former schoolboard trustee and my dad sat as a reeve when I was younger, maybe 5 or 6 years old. The political bug is definitely there and I've definitely passed it on to my kids too. Community involvement for me is a generational thing"

## Attracting Candidates

"I think that making sure people at a young age are involved in organizations that help build leadership skills, will help build interest in the future. Whether it's in an interest in politics or PTA's, they'll feel more comfortable to get involved in their local community."

"I still think it's a misnomer for existing councillors that they truly want to have people engaged to take their job. You're basically asking the group that are there, how do I get more people there so they can take your job from you."

## Women in Politics

"It's really important not to make this a problem of the individual, but to see it from a societal perspective. It goes back to their own sense of their capacity and their leadership abilities. I think that when you see a trend like the 25% in the last couple of municipal elections in Ontario, and across Canada it's evident it's at a societal level."

"Obviously the women around this table have the strength to deal with these issues that come forward. But there are people who do not want to put themselves out there. [Their name would] be in the press, "You did this, and you did that." It may not even be true. But the perception, you know."

"I was born and raised on a dairy farm south of [rural Ontario town]. And I was very involved in 4-H and junior farmers that type of thing. They sent me away a couple of times to different leadership camps. It was the first time ever that I had been involved in that kind of thing, and I think that was where it started, kind of like a little seed inside you growing – that there is a need for females to be out there doing things [like this]."

## Younger Councillors

"It is not a young person's sport from a time commitment point of view. I would love nothing more than to quit my day job so that I could do this again to the fullest of my capabilities, but I have a pension, and at [under 50] I'm not in a position where I could walk away from a pension."

"I really believe that the next generation is what we need to focus on. Some of my colleagues only see the here and now, and I maintain we need a big picture focus and we need to get the youth involved. We need to start encouraging them and getting them to understand the value and importance of getting involved in their community and how to give back. One of the things my husband and I do with our own children is to go out and volunteer together as a family."

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