

Engaging the 'silent majority'?

by BROCK WEIR

Ballots have been cast, votes have been counted, and now we know who will lead this community over the next four years.

To everyone who stepped up to put their names forward for the position of Mayor, Councillor, and Trustee, thank you for not only being engaged in the community but identifying issues close to your hearts, finding your voice on the subjects, plucking up the courage to take them door-to-door (a task that is, in many cases, nothing short of the coldest of cold calls), and seeing the campaign through to the end.

Congratulations to everyone who came out on top, but even if you placed lower on the ballot, congratulations are still in order. You may not have secured a seat, but you threw off any semblance of being 'armchair politicians' and stood up to be the change you wanted to see in the community.

That's nothing to sneeze at. All too many people are comfortable with their butts in the aforementioned armchair ready to have an opinion on just about every issue facing the community - as is their right - and, sure, they might offer some solutions to the issues as well, but all too few want to actually do something about it.

If you happened to fall short, don't despair and don't be discouraged. Continue to stay engaged and be a part of the conversation. 2026 might seem like a long stretch of time, particularly if the old saying 'a week is a long time in politics' holds water - but four years isn't exactly a strenuous wait.

All too many candidates, in my observation, choose to fade into the background if the votes didn't go their way, but if you went door-to-door I suspect that, when engaged, people were listening and enjoyed the opportunity to become more informed.

For those of you who successfully defended your positions at the Council table among the electorate, well done! That's not an easy task in today's political climate where temperatures are hotter than ever and just about everything can be turned into a political football of some sort. Evidently what you achieved over the last four years resonated with voters, was recognized, and ultimately bore fruit on Monday night. Here's to another four years!

If the last term of Council has taught us anything, it's that nobody can possibly predict what can happen in a four-year interval.

Who could have foreseen when the municipal polls last closed in 2018 that the lion's share of the term that was to come would be dominated by an invisible enemy we would all be tasked to fight?

While the population writ large had to 'pivot' for obvious reasons to keep things as normal as possible, so too did municipal governments whose members may have had to put high priority commitments, goals and promises on the backburner to address pressing issues that were unfathomable on the last campaign trail.

The economic fallout of the pandemic was not something that could have been predicted when we almost completely shut down in March of 2020, causing a re-think and a re-prioritization of what needed our money and when.

We tend to view municipal politics as the least 'sexy' of the three levels of government.

Federal and provincial matters might take up the bulk of the bandwidth, but your Prime Minister and MPs, and Premier and MPPs don't control the waste that is picked up from your curb each week and the snow plowed from your streets and sidewalks, take responsibility for the price of water that comes out of your pipes, or how much your property taxes might be in the year ahead. Municipal issues matter and so did your vote.

If you refrained from voting in the lead-up to Monday's election, I have to ask why.

One popular reason for not voting is, "Bah, they're all the same. My vote doesn't matter. Nothing will change."

Even the most cursory of looks at the platform planks offered by each candidate would undermine that theory. If votes were still in short supply this election, diversity of views were not.

"Who cares about municipal politics?" is another.

Look back a couple of paragraphs for the counter argument to that ol' chestnut.

"I'm not voting this time. I voted for X four years ago and they voted for Y, which I oppose for Z reason." Well, surely there must have been at least one candidate who reflected your worldview and your individual priorities.

Looking back, I think these reasons have been trotted out for as long as I can remember regardless of the victors, regardless of the level of government. They didn't hold water then and they don't hold water now.

As candidates who proved successful on Monday night prepare to get down to business, receive updates on some of the major issues facing the Town over the term ahead, and develop what's always hoped to be a collaborative environment, another priority should rise near the top.

If four years, let alone a week, is indeed a long time in politics, there's plenty of time to sit down and figure out just how to properly engage voters in the issues that matter to them, whether it's the 2026 municipal election or any issues and outreach that might come out of Town Hall in the next 48 months.

Voter turnout was dismal almost uniformly across the province, so this community is hardly alone in having this problem to tackle, but what is the way to turn it around? Residents certainly have no shortage of views on how their waste is picked up, how their snow is plowed, or how much they pay on their water and property tax bills, so why don't they show up?

Is it apathy? Is it satisfaction with the general direction things are going? Is it election fatigue? After all, in between municipal elections, we've been to the polls at the Provincial and National levels, not to mention the constant noise coming from our neighbours to the south who seem to perpetually be in an election cycle? Is it something else?

Would making voting mandatory, as is the case in some jurisdictions beyond our borders, be a solution or would that open up a completely different can of worms? Are there ways to incentivize people to vote, such as a small rebate on tax bills in an election year or shaving off a percentage of the water bill? Maybe.

In my early days of covering municipal politics, one female politician who had been at the table for more than 40 non-consecutive years and had seen it all, had a tongue-in-cheek suggestion when her colleagues bemoaned less than a handful of residents coming out to take part in the budget process.

"How about bringing out some dancing girls?" she said, with a laugh, with little regard for political correctness.

That, of course, is not an option to increase engagement in the political process? but it was certainly a novel suggestion. And, perhaps most importantly, it was a suggestion.

Let's see what suggestions come to the fore in the next four years.