

OP Ed: Women Well Represented on Nova Scotia's Municipal Councils

Deputy Mayor Laurie Murley - President, Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities

In 2005, the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities (UNSM) began spearheading a Women in Local Government Project aimed to:

- identify opportunities to better involve women as citizens and politicians in municipal government;
- recommend measures to involve women in all their diversity in consultation and engagement activities of municipal government; and
- reach the target of at least 30 per cent of municipal elected officials across Nova Scotia being women.

The October 2016 municipal elections resulted in women comprising 38 per cent of the mayors across the province. Of the 377 municipal elected officials, 101 are female, representing 27 per cent of all councils.

Research has shown the many barriers women face for those interested in serving as elected officials. These include time constraints, financial constraints, family responsibilities, and lack of confidence.

UNSM offered campaign schools for women in 2008 and in 2012. The Advisory Council on the Status of Women offers a campaign school every two years for women interested in running for federal, provincial or municipal office. In 2016, the Province funded Springtide Collective to run a series of municipal campaign schools open to anyone interested in running for municipal office. This organization actively sought to recruit African Nova Scotians, women, and people living with disabilities. Our experience shows about one-third of those who participate in a campaign school run for office.

So why is it important that women be represented on municipal councils?

The United Nations states that women need to make up at least 30 per cent of decision-making bodies, like municipal councils, before they can affect change. This will encourage more women to voice their opinions on issues of importance to them.

Women make up more than 50 per cent of Nova Scotia's population, which should be reflected in the make-up of our politicians. Women offer different and valuable perspectives when making decisions that affect entire communities. They engage in the community in different ways, and hold a wealth of knowledge about their municipality that is often overlooked. Increasing the number and diversity of women who make municipal decisions will ensure the needs of women and men of all backgrounds and abilities are met. Municipal governments need their talent, knowledge and skills.

UNSM would like to congratulate not only the women who were elected in the 2016 municipal election, but also those who ran but were not successful this time around. Running for office is not as easy task; serving as an elected official is challenging. We celebrate your involvement.

Creating more diverse councils will lead to better decision-making that reflects the broader populations and communities we serve. While there is cause to celebrate the percentage of women mayors across the province, there is more work to do to promote broader diversity in municipal government. We have a small number of municipal councillors who are African Nova Scotian, First Nation and persons with disabilities—we need to do more to involve these communities in all aspects of municipal government. We encourage our diverse communities and all Nova Scotians to vote in municipal elections, participate in public consultations, serve on municipal boards and committees, consider municipal government as a career option, and run for council.

Laurie Murley is the President of the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities. She has served on Windsor Town Council for twelve years. She is currently the Deputy Mayor.

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