

# **AUMA Women in Politics Survey**

## **Executive Summary**

The AUMA Women in Municipal Government (WIMG) Committee surveyed a group of elected female municipal Mayors and Councillors, each with their own diverse background. The survey examined the history of women's participation, current motivation and future prospects.

Among the reasons cited to participate in municipal governance, respondents tended to express an interest in having a voice within their community – allowing for the articulation of their unique perspectives, values, experiences and visions. This was coupled with a desire to play a positive role in their community while expanding their own knowledge base.

Some concerns were expressed regarding barriers to participation. Primarily, issues were raised in attempting to balance home and private life with the pressures and long working hours of Council. The perception of gender tension and questions of whether real change could be affected also played a role.

However, despite these reservations, none of the barriers were viewed as insurmountable. The focus for the future centered around providing educational opportunities for everyone from young girls to mothers to help them recognize the value of their input, build self-esteem and to inspire an interest in participating.

## **Past Experiences of Respondents**

Respondents' background experience was vast and varied with previous work cited in all areas. Mayors and Councillors often come to their positions with diverse business backgrounds – usually entering politics after having work extensively in the public and/or private sphere. Volunteer work is also cited as an important element to their experience and knowledge – sitting on local, regional and national boards on a variety of issues. The advantages these backgrounds provide is quite clear as they are often able to apply their previous experience in their municipal role and bring unique and important perspectives to the discussion table.

## **Support for Mentorship Program**

The survey briefly inquired into the level of support that existed to begin a mentorship program partnering newly elected officials with more experienced ones. Overall, interest and support for such a program was very high with 16 of 23 who commented in favour. One person who expressed ambivalence indicated that the level of time commitment would be a crucial factor.

## **Education Sessions**

A separate question inquired into the desire for education sessions geared towards women in government with a specific focus on what kind of session would be of interest. Interest was strong and various suggestions were forwarded presented. For those already in office, potential courses involved better acquainting them with the internal functioning of administration and the external relationships with both developers and other levels of government. There was also demand for guidance on how to better provide leadership on

key issues individual members wished to explore. Balancing home and work life was among the major issues and one in which education sessions, or experience sharing opportunities were underlined as vital.

On another front, some respondents commented on creating education session that might help those not involved in politics become interested. Helping young girls to become aware of municipal affairs and the role they could play was one such suggestion. Others involved dispersing myths and uncertainties that hovered around women's roles in municipal politics – explaining both the value of their participation and the fulfilling nature of the position. Overall, there was a desire to provide encouragement and motivation for all women to increase their participation.

### **Personal Involvement in Politics**

Respondents were asked to provide their own reasons for taking part in municipal politics. Desire to include their own experiences, knowledge and perspectives in the decision-making process were of fundamental importance. Several respondents indicated a deep-seated commitment to their municipality and participating as a municipal official – helping to contribute to a healthier and better community – was viewed as being quite rewarding.

### **Barriers and Challenges**

Finally, respondents were asked to comment on perceived barriers to political participation. Generally, the responses fell into three broad categories. The first dealt with the fear of criticism and dealing with the pressures of the position. From the outside, a position in municipal government is not necessarily perceived with much respect and such initial perceptions create hurdles for potential candidates to overcome. From the inside, issues of gender tension were often mentioned. The approach of male and female representatives is not always the same and this difference can often manifest itself in some degree of strain and uneasiness. Mentoring and education programs were both cited as possible solutions to these barriers.

The second category under which several responses fell dealt with the general lack of knowledge within the community of the role such positions play. This lack of knowledge or awareness often results in either a sense of apathy or apprehension towards the process at large. Without a sense of how the process occurred, potential candidates may question the value their involvement would provide and whether their input would produce palpable results. Again, education programs were presented as a method through which such difficulties could be addressed.

Thirdly, the costs of running and serving, in all its aspects, were often referred to. These costs included not only the financial burdens of running a campaign, but also the time commitment required for the position. This is especially difficult for mothers who are often attempting to balance a work life with both a private and family life. While the degree to which such positions are involving vary (from part-time to full-time positions), the demand on officials' time is constant. This final point is perhaps one of the most difficult barriers to overcome and requires careful time management. Social support through personal networks provides a valuable asset, and many respondents mention that, while the balance is hard to find, it can be done.