

These stories give an overview of what's happening as we lead up to the October 25th municipal elections - and how you can get involved.

They're Off and Running to the Polls

This year's municipal elections in Ontario are shaping up to have a little more spice than many in recent memory. Always remember, though, that as interesting as they appear today, we have upwards of three months remaining until Election Day on October 25; in politics, 24 hours is lifetime during which almost anything can happen.

Let's take a brief look at some of the interesting races.

Former Ontario Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Jim Watson, is running to fill the Mayor's chair in Ottawa. Watson resigned his provincial seat earlier this year.

Down around the Lake in The Hammer is incumbent Hamilton Mayor, Fred Eisenberger, running for re-election – against a slate of individuals that includes a marijuana advocate, a representative of the Church of the Universe, and an electrician whose last name is...you've got it, "Hamiton".

London also sees a former senior politician on the candidates list. Former Minister of Labour in the Paul Martin government, Joe Fontana, is running for Mayor.

Barrie's election might see another Dunlop in office. Jane Dunlop, wife of Simcoe North MPP, Garfield Dunlop, is running for Council.

Newsworthy Vaughan might just be even more newsworthy by the time October 25 rolls around. The list of candidates already reveals that former MPP, Mario Racco, is challenging incumbent, Linda Jackson, for the Mayor's seat. Equally interesting are the candidates rumoured to run: Federal Member of Parliament, Maurizio Bevilacqua, and former OPP Commissioner Julian Fantino. We'll see.

And in Toronto we have a wide open field. Two-term Mayor, David Miller, is not running for re-election. Upwards of 30 candidates are registered to replace him. Among what most consider to be the "front runners" are (alphabetically) Councillor Rob Ford, Councillor Joe Pantalone, Rocco Rossi (former Heart and Stroke executive), former McGuinty government Cabinet Minister George Smitherman and Sarah Thompson (publisher of Women's Post). Councillor Georgio Mammoliti withdrew from the Mayoral race on July 5 and is re-registered to run for Council.

Disability Issues Make an Impact

Quick to ensure that accessibility and all issues around the municipal jurisdiction on disability issues are well-placed on the radar, several organizations joined recently to coordinate an all-candidate debate featuring the front-running mayoral candidates.

On June 29, at the University of Toronto, March of Dimes worked with Community Living Toronto, CNIB, Community Living Ontario, Holland Bloorview, Canadian Hearing Society, and Surrey Place Centre to hold 2010's first disability-focused election debate.

The debate was moderated by TVO's Steve Paikin, and was attended by a capacity crowd of roughly 300 people. Front-runners Rob Ford, Georgio Mammoliti, Joe Pantalone, Rocco Rossi, George Smitherman and Sarah Thompson answered six pre-screened questions submitted by the coordinating organizations and close to one hour of Q&A from questions from the floor.

Local media, including CBC Radio and CTV, delivered evening coverage of the debate. As well, the entire debate was filmed and is available for viewing in individual segments at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHzq_noANSc.

This was one of the few instances in which candidates in Canada's biggest city spent an evening comparing commitments and solutions to make Toronto accessible to people with disabilities in every possible way.

Special thanks to Karen Bell at Community Living Toronto for her work as Team Captain for this initiative.

You Have the Ability to Make Disability an Issue

Every municipality in Ontario, big and small, is run by an elected body of representatives. Municipalities take care of things like garbage pick-up, road maintenance, local public transit, emergency services, schools, building permits, local parks and recreation, taxis, and hydro and water services. In other words, on a day-to-day basis, your local government has the greatest immediate impact on your life – including accessibility. Yet, most people don't bother to vote in their municipal elections. In fact, it's usually fewer than 30% who do!

Here are a few things you can do to help make a difference in putting disability issues on the radar – and, more importantly, getting a committed agenda from those you want your vote.

- Host an all-candidate meeting. Seek others in your community to help partner with you, organizations like schools, universities and colleges, churches, Business Improvement Area boards, Chambers of Commerce and Boards of Trade, service groups, and local chapters of charitable organizations.
- Start an online blog or website to discuss issues and compare platforms.

- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. The more that other people read about disability, the more that disability becomes everyone's issue.
- Contact the candidates in your municipality and ask each of them specific questions about disability issues in your community. Try to place your questions in a manageable framework. For example, instead of asking, "How would you make the community centre accessible?" consider asking "What steps would you take in your first six months of being in office to ensure that the community centre is accessible to people with disabilities?"
- Ask three people you know to consider disability issues and accessibility when they cast their vote.
- Most importantly, make sure you vote on October 25.