
Subject: Niagara Region Seat at the Table Project Report

Report to: Planning and Economic Development Committee

Report date: Wednesday, July 12, 2023

Recommendations

1. That Regional Council **RECEIVE** this report for information.

Key Facts

- This report provides a summary of the Niagara Region Seat at the Table project which aims to address the systemic barriers that women face when running for municipal office, while also improving the context and environment once elected to ensure their full participation once in office.
- With the support of Regional Council and at the recommendation of the Niagara Region's Women's Advisory Committee, Niagara Region was successful in their application for funding to the Seat at the Table Project. The application was submitted in partnership with Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce, Women in Niagara, City of St. Catharines YWCA, Future Black Female, Services 4 Humanity, Muslim Senior Circle, Niagara Region's Women's Advisory Committee.
- The project ran from April 2022 to April 2023. It included eight sessions, four virtual sessions prior to the October 2022 election, three in person and one virtual session following the elections.
- There was a total of 223 participants in the eight sessions and 26 speakers, panelists, or moderators which included Members of Provincial Parliament, Mayors, Councillors, and municipal employees.
- Seventeen of the women who ran in the October 2022 municipal elections participated in at least one of the four sessions. Eight of those 17 were elected, a success rate of approximately 47 per cent (8 out of 17), while in the general population of women, approximately 49 per cent (40 out of 82) of women candidates were successful.

Financial Considerations

The Niagara Region Seat at the Table project was funded by Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) Canada in partnership with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' Canadian Women in Local Leadership (CanWILL).

Analysis

Project Overview

The Niagara Region Seat at the Table program's goal was to increase the number of women, particularly underrepresented women, elected for municipal government in Niagara by promoting understanding, awareness, and confidence through provision of education and support to those interested in running for election. It accomplished this through a series of sessions with guest speakers and panelists that provided information about the election process, potential challenges, and advice for overcoming barriers. The project included two short mentorship opportunities to increase support for underrepresented women intending to run for municipal government and newly elected women following the election.

In the first phase of the Niagara Region Seat at the Table project, there were four virtual sessions. Click the links below to watch the recordings of the sessions.

- 1) [Municipal government 101 – inspiration, insight and information](https://gncc.ca/seat-at-the-table-session-1/)
(<https://gncc.ca/seat-at-the-table-session-1/>)
- 2) [How to run for municipal election](https://gncc.ca/seat-at-the-table-session-2/) (<https://gncc.ca/seat-at-the-table-session-2/>)
- 3) [Different roles in local government](https://gncc.ca/seat-at-the-table-session-3/) (<https://gncc.ca/seat-at-the-table-session-3/>)
- 4) [Managing scrutiny, addressing bias, discrimination and harassment](https://gncc.ca/seat-at-the-table-workshop-4/)
(<https://gncc.ca/seat-at-the-table-workshop-4/>)

In phase two of the project there were three in person sessions and one virtual session (sessions five through eight). Session five garnered feedback from women who had held seats in office but chose not to run again. Session six gathered feedback from women who ran in the 2022 municipal election but were not successfully elected. Session seven was a learning lunch for women who were successfully elected and the launch of the second mentorship program for newly elected women. The final session was a virtual panel on [how to champion elected women](https://gncc.ca/seat-at-the-table-how-to-champion-women-leaders/) (<https://gncc.ca/seat-at-the-table-how-to-champion-women-leaders/>) that provided key strategies and insights for attendees.

Project Results

In phase one of the project, there were 165 attendees and 16 people who participated as speakers, panelists, or moderators which included Members of Provincial Parliament, Mayors, Councillors, and municipal employees. The first session had the most attendees with 75 people participating online. In phase two of the project, there were a total of 58 session attendees and ten people who participated as speakers, panelists, or moderators. See Appendix 1 for a breakdown of the demographics of session participants.

There were nine mentorship pairs pre-election that included seven current Councillors (at that time), one former Mayor, and nine potential election candidates. The pairs were encouraged to meet once or twice for one to two hours each. They were provided with a list of potential topics to cover but were not restricted to those topics.

The second phase of mentorship was completed with five pairs of newly elected women and previously elected women, some of whom are currently serving. This second phase of mentorship began at the learning lunch hosted on March 22.

Project Impact

Based on participant feedback after the sessions, participants felt session two, which focused on the logistics of how to run for municipal Council, was the most useful. Sessions were considered the most useful when panelists shared real life experiences of local politics. Panelists of diverse cultural backgrounds were most inspiring and impactful to hear from. Participants felt their knowledge, interest, and confidence in getting involved with local politics increased by engaging in these sessions.

Election Results

Since the main goal of this project was to increase participation by women, gender diverse, and underrepresented individuals in municipal politics, analysis of the 2022 municipal elections was conducted. Demographic information is not currently collected for election candidates or successful Councillors. Information on race and gender was gathered from publicly available sources, such as names, pictures, platform pages, and social media. These findings are the best estimates based on accessible information.

Below is a summary of the results for the 2022 October municipal elections including Niagara Region and the 12 local area municipalities. See Appendix 1, for the

breakdown by municipality of total candidates, women candidates, election results by municipality and women elected.

Overall candidates

- 293 total candidates
- 82 women candidates (28 per cent)
- 18 racialized candidates (6 per cent)
- 126 successful candidates (43 per cent)
- 40 successful women candidates (49 per cent success rate) (30 per cent of overall positions)
- Two per cent of successful candidates identified as racialized, and 1.6 per cent identified as racialized and women

Seat at the table participants

- 17 women candidates participated in at least one Seat at the Table session
- Eight of those candidates were elected (47 per cent success rate)

Overall, there was an increase in the number of women elected in Niagara from 2018, when 38 women were elected to 40 elected in 2022. The biggest increase was at Regional Council, with three additional women elected. Increases were present in Grimsby, Lincoln, and West Lincoln local Councils, while there were decreases in the local Councils in Pelham, Port Colborne, St. Catharines, Thorold, and Fort Erie.

Challenges Encountered While Campaigning or as a Councillor

In the feedback sessions after the election, participants discussed the challenges they encountered while campaigning for municipal Council.

Personal challenges:

- Limited or changes in personal support systems, like a supportive family member moving away, negatively affected the ability to run a successful campaign
- Experienced online negativity, including negative rumours spread about them

Structural challenges:

- The cost of running a campaign, especially in municipalities without the ward systems, where a larger number of residents are spread over a large geography

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- Residents unaware of some of the foundational aspects of the elections, particularly misunderstanding the jurisdictions and roles between different levels of government

Elected officials discussed the challenges they faced while in office:

- Serving with all new Councillors
- Some Councillors serving for a very long time, challenging to bring in new perspectives
- Length of time serving and the benefits and challenges of serving for one term compared to multiple terms
- Time commitment required for elected officials compared to the compensation received
- Times of meetings, which may not be conducive for many women and gender diverse individuals, people who work during the day without flexible work hours, or those with family commitments

Elected officials faced challenges from community members:

- Discriminatory statements based on race, gender, and sexuality
- Experiences of ageism where younger Councillors were considered to be inexperienced, and older Councillors were viewed as past their prime
- Heard comments based on level of experience, where new Councillors were criticized for not understanding the “game”, yet the new Councillors chose to approach their roles as Councillors in a different way

Advice for the Future

Session participants shared advice for people who are considering campaigning for municipal office in the future:

- Ask a lot of questions, be authentic and make connections based on mutual support
- Get involved in the community and build networks to gain name recognition
- Get involved through various forms of activism, delegating to Council on topics of interest, attending or watching Council sessions, or joining committees
- Be realistic about the time available to commit to the work. It is important to be self-reflective leading up to and during a candidacy so as not to take on too much.
- Be prepared for public scrutiny for the duration of the campaign and if elected, including extra attention from the press and media

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- Recognize that the negativity or scrutiny can be outside of one's control
 - Find a way to ignore or deal with people who will post or say negative comments
 - Build strong supportive networks – this could include people with campaigning experience or simply a supportive work environment, network of friends and family
 - Ensure sufficient campaign planning, including childcare, friends and allies for support, and realistic targets for outreach
 - Find supportive allies, who are respectful, supportive, and good listeners, who can disagree in a way that is flexible, responsive, while willing to work together
 - Once elected, be prepared for decisions to not go the way you expect or desire and have strategies to help you cope with disappointment
 - Above all else, it is important to maintain integrity as a Councillor and candidate

Suggestions to improve campaign opportunities for municipalities:

- Facilitate more public forums to provide opportunities for candidates to become known in the community
- Creating grants or interest free loans for candidates from underrepresented groups for covering campaign costs
- Promote volunteer/community service hours and co-op hours for political science students to help people from underrepresented groups run a campaign

Suggestions for future implementation of similar projects:

- Content should include considerations of diverse perspectives when making decisions, including considerations of women and gender diverse individuals
- Provision of childcare or other household supports to address some of the barriers faced
- Include diverse panelists with informative and inspirational experiences, including rural and urban perspectives, as this was notably appreciated by participants
- Begin the process further in advance of elections to allow participants more time to use the information and skills they learn
- Include content on what certain elected positions entail, what is the time commitment, how to have an impact in municipal politics, and how to prepare for an elected position
- Make sessions more accessible, through offering them at different times and having a mix of virtual and in person options

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- To increase engagement, enhance and widen the promotion and communication of these sessions meeting underrepresented communities where they are so there is greater awareness of the program and therefore greater potential uptake

Alternatives Reviewed

No alternatives were reviewed for this project.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

The Niagara Region Seat at the Table project supported the strategic priority to foster a more **Sustainable and Engaging Government** by encouraging and supporting more women and gender diverse individuals, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds to participate in local politics.

Other Pertinent Reports

- [CSC-C 29-2021](#) Recommendation from the Women's Advisory Committee meeting held on October 6, 2021

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Data in support of PDS 20-2023 Niagara Region Seat at the Table Report