



Local Democracy: In it Together

Local governments need to be leaders in building communities with a high quality of life for all residents.

Local governments need to involve residents in finding solutions to address important issues.



Municipal elections have the lowest voter turnout of all the elections in BC. Many people are unaware of the roles that local governments play in making communities livable and maintaining a high quality of life for their residents. However, a new understanding is being formed around the role that local governments can play in the face of rapid economic, social, and environmental change, as well as shifting government priorities. Because the consequences of these issues are most visible at the local level, municipal governments have an interest in defining their role in responding to the issues. Citizens also have an interest in representing themselves and their concerns to council and have an opportunity to become more involved in finding solutions to community problems.

Whether a community is growing in response to rising resource prices, or facing decline because of the influences of the global economy, local governments are increasingly feeling the brunt of change. Combined with shifts in

federal and provincial government priorities that see the 'off-loading' of responsibilities, local government is becoming more important than ever. However, this does not mean that local governments are given a mandate or the resources to deliver services or address issues like poverty, housing, homelessness and addiction by themselves. They need to consider the best roles they can play, such as taking on the role of the convenor.

Local governments can play a convening role by bringing together stakeholders to identify issues and priorities. When local councils are asked to address social issues that may call for additional support and funding beyond their control, they can take a leadership role in communicating community concerns to senior levels of government. Doug Bing, of the Pitt Meadows City Council comments,

“ Local governments are the eyes and ears of the community and their early response ” ▶

Municipality Votes

is critical if a problem is to be resolved in a timely way. As the level of government closest to the people, I see local government as having a crucial role in prompting higher levels of government to take action on issues which first manifest themselves or are most visible at the local level. ”

Relaying community issues and concerns to higher levels of government is a vital function of government at the municipal level, and if done effectively, can result in funding to properly address these issues. In 2004, Prince Rupert City Council and other community stakeholders held a community forum to discuss the issues affecting their city, as well as possible solutions. The identified issues and solutions were formulated in what was called “The Mayor’s Report” and subsequently sent to higher levels of government. Through the North Coast Community Asset Development Initiative (now known simply as NCCA), this action resulted in substantial funding to address issues within Prince Rupert, and resulted in long-term solutions to ensure the vitality and sustainability of the city.

When local governments are asked to respond to community social issues, their plans to address an issue should be made with the inclusion of local citizens. Local citizens will be the ones most affected by any changes local governments may make, therefore citizens should contribute to forming the solutions. In a democracy, citizens choose who will represent them on decisions that affect their way of life. Local governments

are in the best position to understand their communities and develop local approaches to address complex social issues. Councillor Marilyn Belak of the City of Dawson Creek says of her council:

“ We are ethically bound to get the best training and information possible for our mayors, councillors and staff in order to create the best public education/consultation and responses possible. Communities are teams of private citizens, economic sectors and elected leaders who in the modern global picture have all the information that is needed to create vibrant and visionary places for people to live. ”

Municipal councils can take positive steps within their mandates to create more liveable communities, such as by reviewing and evaluating municipal bylaws to remove barriers to accessibility, creating plans for affordable housing, and improving community services for marginalized people, adopting local purchasing programs to support local business and reducing environmental impact, and, especially, providing support for community groups that are working on social issues, such as community social planning organizations, and others supporting resident engagement in local issues. Community groups are increasingly involved in the decision-making

process of municipalities. Working with social planning councils, municipalities can foster dialogue between community members and city developers, as well as between the city and different levels of government.

The role of community members in supporting local democratic processes is just as important as the support from municipal governments. Being present and being an informed citizen are two ways people can make constructive contributions to local democracy.

Aside from participating in local elections, citizens can also organize their own forums, where they discuss local issues and bring a diverse range of options and opinions to the table. Community groups can bring issues to council meetings and keep them informed of community efforts to address social issues. Communities are also free to create and participate in their own social planning councils. Citizens can also run as candidates in local elections if they don't find a candidate that best represents them.

Local government is becoming more influential. Both citizens and local governments can be leaders in defining what makes communities livable and set the bar to achieve a high quality of life together. Local governments can play a convening role by bringing together stakeholders to identify issues and priorities. When local councils are asked to address social issues that may call for additional support and funding beyond their control, they can take a leadership role in communicating community concerns to senior levels of government. ■



What kind of role do you think local governments can play in addressing social issues?

How will you support community organizations working to address community issues such as poverty, homelessness, etc.?

For More Information:

The Social Role of Local Government
(Caledon Institute of Social Policy)
www.caledoninst.org

Vibrant Communities
<http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2.php>

BC Civil Liberties Association
www.bccla.org/citizenshipguide/index.html