



UVSS joins Saanich group “re-inventing” citizenship

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Tim Lindsay

“I am sick to death of people trying to sell me on a political candidate or a belief,” said Sher Morgan, chair of the Saanich Civic League (SCL).

Those seem like strange words coming from a person whose group is dedicated to increasing voter turnout in the upcoming Nov. 15 Saanich municipal elections.

Morgan’s point is that citizens are rarely inspired when somebody talks to them about a specific issue like sewage treatment: they either support it, reject it or shut down entirely because they don’t have an opinion.

What is lacking, says Morgan, is “civic engagement” – something the SCL is trying to foster by going door-to-door in the community and asking people questions about what they value.

“If you ask people about what they desire and value in their community, then you engage people’s brains and hearts,” said Morgan. “When you ask people about what they love, it’s easier for them to go to the next step of saying, ‘I will act for what I love and value in my community.’”

Only 19 per cent of voters participated in the 2005 Saanich municipal elections, down from 25 percent in 2002 and 30 percent in 1996. That low voter turnout is what prompted the formation of the SCL, which is modeled after a similar citizen-led initiative in Guelph, Ont.

Morgan said a group of Saanich citizens came together, and through consultations identified a shared set of 10 core values which they used to come up with survey questions to engage citizens. They struck a committee to review three years of Saanich council motions to identify how incumbent councilors voted on issues that relate to those values. In the coming weeks, the SCL will be writing profiles on each candidate to post on their website.

In August, SCL volunteers surveyed 300 people in 14 Saanich neighborhoods. Morgan said it “blew our socks off” that each interview took a full 45 minutes on average.

“People really did want to talk about what they value about their community,” she said. “We realized there was huge potential for citizen engagement despite the low voter turnout.”

Morgan readily acknowledges that the survey results are not representative of the whole community.

“I think students and younger people generally are going to have different priorities than the areas we surveyed,” admitted Morgan, before pointing out that some 2,000 students who reside on campus are located in Saanich.

UVic students can vote if they are B.C. residents and have lived in the municipality for 30 days. Morgan was astonished to learn that an estimated 7,000 UVic students live in Saanich, especially since just 15,700 people voted in the last election.

“That’s the largest single demographic group that could influence who’s elected to Saanich council this year,” said Morgan.

On Monday, Oct. 20, the UVSS Board of Directors voted in favour of enlisting the UVSS as an organizational member of the SCL.

“The [SCL] shares a lot of the values that the UVSS holds,” said Ed Pullman, UVSS director of academics. “They stand for inclusive communities, local food, strong public transit, and active citizen engagement. The UVSS supports all of these causes.”

To take the Saanich Civic League survey, click [here](#).