

## Local politics needs your vote

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Something is seriously wrong when three-quarters of the eligible voters in Victoria choose not to vote in a municipal election.

**In Saanich**, the region's largest municipality, the turnout is even worse -- **only 19 per cent of eligible voters cast ballots**. Across the region, municipal and school board elections are non-events for far too many people.

That's unfortunate. It's even dangerous. Turnouts are so low that a relatively small single-interest group could elect its own candidates. It took only 5,200 votes, representing the support of eight per cent of the electorate, to win a seat on Victoria council.

But more importantly, these kinds of turnouts signal **a disconnect between citizens and government that undermines democracy. Our system requires not just taxpayers, but an engaged citizenry**. The minimum requirement is a willingness to vote.

There are changes that could help. Provincial and federal elections are both conducted by independent bodies with a mandate that includes increasing participation. Measures as basic as shifting election day off the traditional Saturday should be tried.

The real answer, though, lies with each of us. We have to accept our responsibility to follow the campaigns, ensure the right issues are raised and then select the candidates who demonstrate the skills, experience and policy ideas to steer our municipalities -- and school districts -- through the next three years.

Some issues are intensely local. Others cut across all the capital regional communities.

Crime, for example. The capital region remains a remarkably safe place to live. But property crimes, largely driven by drug addiction, have undermined our sense of security. When residents fear that a weekend away might bring a break-in, or that a car left in a parkade will be broken into, something important is lost.

So what do candidates propose? More officers? A greater effort to address addictions, the underlying cause? Regional policing, in recognition that crackdowns on community crime problems can simply push the problem into the next municipality?

Transportation is another critical issue in which the region has gone backward; delays and congestion are worse than ever and increasing. Do candidates propose improving transit or building roads? Or do they consider this a provincial issue fundamentally beyond their ability to deal with directly?

Closely related, there is the question of development, both within municipalities and across the region. Most candidates will likely claim to support increased density and protected green space and reduced sprawl. But achieving those goals demands specific actions -- allowing taller buildings, legalizing basement suites, encouraging infill development in established neighbourhoods. All involve trade-offs, and some will create controversy within neighbourhoods. Candidates should have clear positions.

Many of those measures will also be relevant to what should also be a critical issue -- housing affordability. Soaring home prices have pleased most homeowners, but more than one-third of capital region residents rent their accommodation. The high prices are also a potential barrier to economic growth, creativity and innovation and could drive the next generation away from the region. Candidates should be clear on whether they see this as a problem and what solutions are possible.

Voters should expect candidates to have plans for more effective regional approaches to all these issues -- whether through amalgamation or a larger role for the Capital Regional District.

There will be other important issues, like sewage treatment.

But voters should be on guard against allowing the elections to become focused on any single issue, no matter how important or controversial. Candidates must demonstrate coherent positions on all the challenges the region faces, and the experience and skills to deal with issues that will emerge. Single-issue candidates -- or slates -- have little to offer.

And, of course, there is the critical question of how much residents should expect to pay for all these services. Candidates should make it clear how they will manage property taxation and spending to ensure manageable increases and value for money.

Municipal governments face huge pressures. The public's expectations are large, but councils' actions are often limited by senior governments.

But ultimately, they are critical in **determining the quality of life for our communities now and in the future**. The candidates deserve our support and attention, and **our active participation in the democratic process**.

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