

Municipal governments are 'Ready For Her'



Paul Krajewski photos High River Times
Councillors Delilah Miller and Suzanne Oel (left), from the MD of Foothills, and Cathy Couey (right), with the Town of High River, are encouraged by the Government of Alberta's campaign to inspire more women to run in the upcoming municipal election.



By Paul Krajewski
MULTIMEDIA JOURNALIST

The Government of Alberta recently launched a campaign to inspire and encourage women to run in the upcoming municipal election.

Traditionally, municipal councils have been dominated by men, as seen by Alberta's Municipal Affairs reporting that women accounted for approximately one in four politicians in the 2013 election. It's said their participation was as low as 7 per cent in some regions of the province.

The Ready for Her campaign, spearheaded by Alberta's Ministry of Status of Women, informs aspiring candidates about election and nomination processes, campaigning and fundraising possibilities, and the roles and responsibilities of a politician.

With inspirational and informational videos from some of the province's female politicians, including municipal councillors and mayors along with federal and provincial incumbents, the initiative's website, ReadyForHerAlberta.ca, is seen by the government as a one-stop-shop for women thinking of entering the

political field.

Suzanne Oel, councillor with the MD of Foothills, said politicians should be elected based solely on merit, accountability and capability, not gender.

Although she hasn't encountered the overwhelming sexism women experienced in the past, she said it's still prevalent today and often challenges them to overcome it by working harder than the men.

"In southern Alberta, there aren't as many women in politics as in the urban areas, so it was a little bit of a surprise (when I entered), but that's the reality of working in rural Alberta," she explained. "Sometimes I'm in a room where I'm only one of a couple of women (who) are representatives."

It's a trend she became accustomed to in the business world prior to entering public service, she noted.

"Often, I face the stereotypical comments where people are surprised I'm the councillor as opposed to the support staff," she said, adding that the out-dated sentiment of inferiority has diminished over time.

Coun. Delilah Miller with the MD said gender inequality and sexism has no place in politics.

Having been raised in a politically charged household, she said her family believed "the best person should run for the job and that's who



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— Coun. Cathy Couey,
Town of High River

should win."

"Whether you were male or female, that was never presented as an obstacle for me," she explained. "(Candidates) should view themselves as having an equal chance to win and not let any of those obstacles stand in their way."

Miller said she never let the inequality dissuade her from entering the public realm.

"I've always felt that because I know a lot about politics, I was always an equal contender to my male counterparts—I can hold my own," she said, adding she often feels the need to be sharper and more informed.

"I approach other male politicians and engage them in conversation to show them that I am fully aware and know what the issues are and am as confident a politician as they are."

Cathy Couey, councillor with the Town of High River, said it's hard to believe that gender is still an issue in politics today.

"When I look back at some of the things that happened in provincial politics in the spring, it made me incredibly sad that (gender) even became an issue," the daughter of a former High River mayor explained. "It's disheartening to see that happen in any form."

Strong, effective governments are created by diverse groups working together cohesively as a team and not the divisive notion that women are somehow subordinate to men, she added.

Couey encouraged anyone inter-

ested in running in the upcoming election to get up to speed on all the topics, understand the commitment and responsibilities of the role and reach out to other councillors and community leaders.

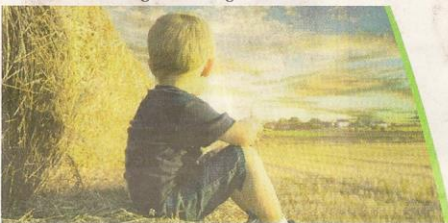
"Get a real sense for what you're going into and a real understanding of why you want to do it," she explained. "It's fulfilling to get involved. If you have that interest, jump in with both feet, but do it with eyes wide open and as much information as you can."

In an intro to the campaign on the Ready For Her website, Premier Rachel Notley said women have an equal opportunity to be elected.

"The facts are clear, when women run they win as often as men," she explained. "It comes down to the confidence that you can run, win and make a difference... that you are part of the community just as much as anyone else is... and that your voice and experience can help make peoples' lives better."

Prospective candidates have until Sept. 18 to submit their nomination forms for the Oct. 16 election to the provincial government.

For more information on the campaign, visit ReadyForHerAlberta.ca.





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