

Workshop encourages candidates to run for office

By ROY LEWIS

Running for municipal council can provide great personal satisfaction to citizens but there are definitely some reasons to seek an elected office in local government according to a veteran politician.

"Don't run for office to get rid of someone who is currently serving on council. That is a very wrong reason to run," says Sandra Lawn, former mayor of Prescott.

Lawn was the keynote speaker at a workshop last week to encourage candidates to run in this fall's municipal elections. The workshop was co-sponsored by the Township of Elizabethtown-Kitley and the City of Brockville to encourage local residents to seek municipal office and to give some in-depth understanding about what the job of a municipal councillor entails together with some pointers about the actual process of electorship.

"You should not run on just one issue or to get on council to stir things up," says Lawn.

Such a candidate might get elected but Lawn, who served 15 years as mayor of Prescott, says she has found "it is unlikely that candidate will get elected again."

"You must keep in mind there is a long list of concerns in every municipality and each issue is interconnected with other issues," she says.

Among other things, council will be called upon to consider setting budgets, streets and roads, transportation systems, waste management, public utilities, sewage treatment and collection, flood control, structures, fences, parking, animal control, economic planning and development.

Appointments

The appointment of citizens to agencies, boards and commissions is another important role of council. Lawn advised when councillors are considering an appointment to "judge people on what they have done, not what they say."

People often think the head of council has more power than other members. A mayor or reeve will have more responsibility on council in providing leadership but "when it comes to a vote, the head of council only has one vote."

"If you have never run for council before, you have a lot of homework to do in the short term before the election," she says.

For those who intend to run, Lawn advises them to attend every single meeting of council they can. They should become familiar with the Official Plan for the municipality which details what the community intends to do in future development.

"Don't get involved in municipal politics just for the money," says Lawn.

Serving on council is "a huge time commitment" that has been lengthened since the term of office is now four years instead of three. Councillors must



EMC photo by ROY LEWIS

Sandra Lawn, former mayor of Prescott, gestures as she speaks at a recent workshop designed to encourage candidates to run for office in municipal government.

attend many meetings meaning it will involve time away from their families. To serve on council requires "a good management of your personal life."

If elected, new councillors will be involved in problem solving and team work. Watching the "body language" of their fellow councillors can assist in learning how they are thinking according to Lawn. Making notes is also important and Lawn advised newcomers to listen although she admits, "it is one of the hardest things to do."

Communications is also an important part of being on council with "face to face communications" being the best. Council needs to rely on the media to communicate what it is doing on behalf of the citizens in the community. She advised members of council to never ignore the media but "to think carefully" before speaking to a reporter.

"You must rely on your staff to guide you and always remember there is no such thing as a dumb question," says Lawn.

She says that members of council should never criticize staff before the media or members of the public for it is "extremely demoralizing." The criticisms may not be wrong but "it is no way to run a railroad so think before you speak."

Lawn was also critical of anyone on council who was trying to "micro manage" the municipality. Some councillors wrongly assume they have the power to order staff to carry out some project.

"You have no authority as an individual but do have the authority as a full council directing department heads to carry out the work," she says.

Lawn says when she was campaigning, she produced a brochure about her background and organized a team of friends to assist her particularly in visiting voters door to door since "it is the most effective way to campaign."

Idea for workshop

Yvonne Robert, administrator-clerk for Elizabethtown-Kitley Township, got the idea for the potential candidates' workshop after attending a similar meeting sponsored by the Leeds and Thousand Islands Ratepayers' Association. She was later joined in the effort by Sandra Seale, city clerk of Brockville. Both clerks outlined the various aspects of interactions between a municipality's staff and members of council with one of the most important being good relations.

"Bad relations between council and staff give the impression that something is wrong in the municipality while good relations foster trust between local government and the residents," says Robert.

The role of council members is to represent the public and consider the well-being and interests of the municipality. They develop and evaluate policies and programs, determine which services the municipality provides and ensure that practices and procedures are in place to implement the decisions of council.

Councillors must maintain the financial integrity of the municipality and carry out their duties according to existing laws, in particular the Municipal Act which was last revised in 2001.

Among the other duties of council is to make policies that include long term planning, budgeting, provision for services and enacting bylaws that establish the acceptable standards for the municipality. The overall management of the municipality is the responsibility of councillors who ensure that policies are developed that are consistent with its direction.

Council also oversees the administration of the municipality to "get the biggest bang for the taxpayers' buck" according to Robert.

While it is council that steers the boat, it is the staff that does the rowing, pointed out Seale.

Department heads in a municipality are responsible to ensure that policies and programs are implemented efficiently and effectively. They monitor performance levels, maintain work schedules and develop department budgets.

Public relations

One important role of staff is public relations. Staff members must act as ambassadors for the municipality since they are usually the first contact for residents.

"Just one conversation can reflect badly on the whole municipality," notes Seale.

Another role of staff members is to provide advice to council on policy, hear comments and suggestions from the public that "helps to confirm policies from the ground level," and keep abreast of legislative changes and requirements and advise council how these changes may affect the municipality.

Council expects staff to give brief but thorough reports, suggest policy alternatives and implications, information and analysis, follow-up actions, and understand that council will make some political decisions. Members of council also expect loyalty and support of their staff.

But staff also has expectations of council including the recognition of the organizational structure and reporting hierarchy, familiarity with municipal organizations and operations, appreciating the statutory responsibilities and other aspects of the job and be objective and consistent when applying policy. The municipality's employees also expect clear direction from council as to what must be done while leaving some discretion as to how it will be done.

Council and staff members do not always agree on policy or actions according to Robert.

to Seale. But councillors are asked to respect the professional opinions offered by staff and outside professionals and the recognition of the professional obligations of various staff members.

More information about this year's municipal election and the operations of council in Elizabethtown-Kitley and Brockville can be obtained by contacting Robert or Seale. Those wanting information are asked to call ahead and arrange for a convenient time.

Those attending the workshop were also given a list of important dates in the 2006 municipal election which will be held on Nov.

13. Nominating Day is Sept. 29 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The withdrawal of nominations must be made by 5 p.m. on Oct. 2 and the certification of nomination papers will be done before 4 p.m. Additional nominations, if required, will be done on Oct. 4. Certificate of maximum campaign spending limits will be issued on Oct. 10.

"We live in a fantastic part of Canada and it is our responsibility to ensure we have the very best in local government," says Lawn.

Roy Lewis is a Brockville freelance writer on assignment for the EMC.