



What's it Like to Serve on Municipal Council? | October 16, 2013

Next week, October 20-26, is Local Government Week across Ontario.

The initiative is led by the Association of Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario (AMCTO) in partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and other municipal associations. AMO supports this worthy effort to educate people, particularly young people, about the role, importance and processes of municipal government.

We asked a number of elected officials what it's like to serve on Council. Interestingly, all three said similar things. It is a tough but rewarding job, with long hours and personal sacrifices. To succeed you have to be prepared to learn a lot about a lot of very different things. You have to listen, you have to be willing to compromise, and most importantly, you have to love the job.

We are also privileged to have perspectives from two of Ontario's longest serving elected officials. Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion has had a legendary career. However, the good people of Manitoulin Island will be quick to point out that she isn't Ontario's longest serving municipal official. Not even close. That honour goes to Austin Hunt, Mayor of Billings Township, who is the longest serving elected official in Canada. We are also privileged to have the perspective of Ontario's youngest municipal official: 24 year old Jacob Mantle, Councillor for Uxbridge Township.

On behalf of AMO, I want to thank Mayors McCallion and Hunt for their lifetime of service to their communities – and I want to thank Jacob and the more than 3,000 people who follow in their footsteps by serving on Ontario's municipal councils.

If you want to find out more about Local Government Week and what you can do to support it locally, AMCTO's website features more information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Russ Powers'.

Russ Powers
President of AMO and Councillor for the City of Hamilton (26 years)



Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion

First Elected to Council: 1970 (as Mayor of Streetsville)

Years of Service: 43

Mayor McCallion has been recognized internationally as one of the most popular municipal leaders in the world.

“I entered politics with the desire to help others and to make a difference, and it’s been a privilege to represent the citizens of Mississauga for the last 35 years. Being an elected official brings great responsibility, and I’m reminded of the adage, “of whom much is given, much is expected.” I tried to do the most with what I have been given for the benefit of my community.

Service in municipal government offers many rewards. You are in a position to truly effect change, to alter people’s lives for the better, and to be an advocate for those in need. We meet people of diverse backgrounds and life experiences, and it’s good to share ideas with them.

I believe public service is one of the most noble pursuits an individual can undertake and service on Council provides a wonderful opportunity to give back to one’s community. However, anyone contemplating public service should do some real soul searching before they throw their hat into the ring. Few people consider the exhaustive time commitment, the impact on one’s personal life, whether they have the necessary knowledge and experience for the job, whether they are prepared to make controversial and often unpopular decisions, and whether they are willing to live their lives under constant scrutiny.

To have a successful career as a municipal official, you need to have a genuine desire to help others and to be compassionate. You have to want to make a positive difference. You need to be prepared to take time to listen to all opinions, including opposing views; to adopt a collaborative approach and to build consensus; to show courage and political will, even when faced with dissenters; and ultimately, to be loyal to your constituents.

Public service in and of itself demands sacrifice. Politics is not a 9 to 5 job. Issues and situations don’t take holidays. The schedule is hectic and very demanding. The impact on one’s personal and family life takes a toll and it requires a great deal of energy and commitment. The public expects, rightly so, that a politician must give 100%, all the time. Giving yourself over to a higher cause for the benefit of others can be challenging, but at the same time it’s a great honour.”



Billings Township Mayor Austin Hunt

First Elected to Council: 1953

Years of Service: 59

Mayor "Aussie" Hunt got his political start as a driver for Lester B. Pearson. His career on Council spans the terms of 11 Canadian Prime Ministers and 10 Ontario Premiers.

"I've spent most of my life on municipal council and it has been extremely rewarding. I started out by filling a vacancy on council when my uncle passed away. People suggested that I fill it, so I did. I didn't serve as Mayor until 1970.

You have to be genuinely interested in serving people and your community to do this – and you have to appreciate that you become the public's complaints department. No matter how well things are going, you are going to get a whole lot of complaints. That is part of the job. It won't change. You have to be able to take these complaints and turn them into solutions that help people. That's the rest of the job.

To be honest, I think that many people enter politics because they want to complain about something. To their credit, they also want to find the solution. You can't really complain about a problem unless you're also prepared to fix it. And there is great satisfaction in making things better for someone, or everyone, in your community.

You also learn that you have to compromise to get things done. I think that can be hard for some people when they start out in politics. Many people get discouraged by that. But in reality, you have to make personal compromises if you want to make progress for your community.

The way things are done has changed a lot over the years. People like to use e-mail and social media now, but I still prefer to use the telephone. The telephone works well when you are trying to get something done.

It can be a tough job. You need to have a thick skin. And you have to put in way more than an eight-hour day. I live very close to the municipal office. That helps a lot.

The job requires you to do a lot of research on the many things that municipalities are responsible for. You have to be truly interested in these things. You have to love it – and you have to want to make things better. It won't work out otherwise.

What you do won't be enough for some people, but at a certain point there is nothing that you can do about that. I sleep soundly at night, knowing that I have done my best with the best of intentions."



Jacob Mantle, Ward 4 Councillor for the Town of Uxbridge

First Elected to Council: 2010

Years of Service: 3

Elected at the age of 21, Councillor Mantle is the youngest serving member of a municipal council in Ontario.

“I joined municipal council to make a difference in my community, and to address the underrepresentation of youth and young adults within municipal government. My colleagues on council have been very receptive and helpful. They are both peers and mentors, which I have greatly appreciated.

The multitude of issues that we deal with is the greatest challenge. Municipalities provide a wide range of services, but that is just the beginning. It doesn't matter if it is a municipal, provincial or federal matter, people in the community will come to you. Whether it's funding, fire halls or fuel prices, you are the point person that many people turn to.

The most rewarding aspect of the responsibility has been seeing all the progress that we have made. For example, we wanted to build a new skate park in Uxbridge; we figured out innovative ways to design, build and fund it; and now it is being enjoyed by the entire community. That's a great feeling. The same goes for helping an individual or a family in your community. It's very satisfying to know that you have the ability help and influence positive change.

My advice to anyone who wants to run for municipal office would be to get out there and start knocking on doors, pound the pavement, and listen to your community. You can't be effective unless you listen to your community and understand the issues and challenges facing it. You also have to prepare yourself for the time commitment involved and the inevitable criticism that will come your way. Be prepared for some slings and arrows. The best response is to listen to your residents, do your homework, make the best decision for the community and don't take the criticism personally.

When all is said and done, serving on Council has been, and continues to be, an honour and a blessing. I continue to be encouraged by the people I have met and by the energy that is in our community. Participation on Council may not be for everyone, but being an active member of your community is. I think everyone should think about how they can pursue what they love doing, while contributing to their community. We have so many great people in Uxbridge who give generously of their time and talent across countless volunteer initiatives. If you are thinking of serving in office someday, that volunteer work can be a great place to start.”