



Inside Elected Office:

What It Takes to Run and Serve
in Local Government



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Foreword

For more than a decade, StrategyCorp has surveyed chief administrative officers (CAOs) across Ontario. Through that work, we have examined the opportunities and challenges facing local government, often through the lens of municipal administration. We have explored questions of governance, council-staff relations, and what is required to support effective local decision-making.

Over the same period, we have had the privilege of working with municipalities across the province and speaking with hundreds of mayors and councillors. Those engagements have typically occurred in the context of specific projects or mandates – asking about service delivery needs or community priorities, for example. Rarely have we had the opportunity to ask elected officials about the experience of public service itself.

This report grew from a desire to better understand that experience, particularly as we look ahead to the upcoming municipal election in October 2026.

What drives people to run for local elected office? What realities do they encounter once elected? How does the role measure up against expectations? What lessons have they learned, and what advice might they offer to those considering public service?

To answer these questions, we interviewed mayors, deputy mayors, and councillors from across Ontario, and their reflections form the foundation of our study. We are deeply grateful for their willingness to contribute their time and perspectives to this project.

Their stories reveal both the rewards and realities of local public service. They remind us that effective local government depends not only on sound policies and strong institutions, but also on people willing to dedicate their time, energy, and expertise to their communities.

We hope this report provides valuable insight for prospective candidates, current elected officials, municipal administrators, and anyone interested in the future of local democracy. Most of all, we hope it contributes to a broader conversation about how we prepare, support, and empower those who choose to serve and support the health of local democracy in Ontario.

Introduction

Local government depends on people being willing to put their names on a ballot and serve their communities. It is a deeply vulnerable form of public service that shapes the places where people live, work, and raise their families. Yet there are growing signs that people's willingness to undertake this commitment should not be taken for granted. Evidence suggests that attracting and retaining local elected officials is becoming more difficult.

The 2022 municipal election saw 553 elected officials – nearly one in five – elected by acclamation, while 32 municipalities elected their entire councils without a contested race.¹ Although acclamations occur for many reasons, they can signal challenges in attracting candidates and sustaining competitive local elections. Retention is also emerging as an issue. By early 2026, more than 150 elected officials who won seats in the 2022 election had resigned, approximately double the number recorded during the previous term of council.²

The role itself has also become more demanding. Mayors and councillors serve at a time when confidence in public institutions is under strain and governments face increasing skepticism about their ability to respond to the complex challenges facing communities. At the local level, a 2025 Leger poll found that only 51 per cent of Canadians trust their municipal governments.³

Public debate has also become more polarized, and many elected officials report increasing levels of incivility and harassment while in office. The 2025 Canadian Municipal Barometer found that 63 per cent of mayors and councillors surveyed had experienced harassment while in office.⁴

Taken together, these trends present a stark warning sign for municipal government. Their implications extend beyond individual municipalities or councils, raising important questions about the future of local leadership and democratic participation.

The perspectives of today's elected officials offer important insights into what draws people to public office, what helps them succeed, and what encourages them to continue. This report follows the journey of local public service, from the decision to run for office through the realities of governing and, ultimately, the decision of whether to seek another term. It seeks to better understand what it takes to serve effectively in elected office and what enables members of council to advance the interests of their communities.

¹ Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), [Healthy Democracy Project](#).

² Sadrine Rastello, ["Why So Many Mayors Are Quitting."](#) The Walrus, April 23, 2026.

³ Leger, [Trust in Government, and Views on Provincial Sovereignty](#), May 23, 2025.

⁴ Canadian Municipal Barometer, ["Harassment in Municipal Politics: Experiences of Local Politicians."](#) March 7, 2025.

METHODOLOGY

In spring 2026, StrategyCorp conducted 20 interviews with elected officials from across Ontario, including mayors, deputy mayors, and councillors.

We sought to capture a broad range of experiences and perspectives. Participants represented different stages of political life, from elected officials completing their first four years in office to long-serving municipal leaders with multiple terms behind them. The interview group included both those intending to seek re-election in the upcoming municipal election and those preparing to step away from public office.

To reflect the diversity of Ontario's municipal landscape, we engaged politicians from growing urban centres, mid-sized communities undergoing transition, and smaller rural and northern municipalities. We also aimed to include both men and women in the interview pool, curious to understand how gender may shape experiences of seeking and holding elected office.

All participants took part voluntarily. Direct quotations included throughout this report have, in some cases, been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

The interview guide is included in the Appendix.



Executive Summary

One message came through consistently across the interviews: elected office is unlike what many expect it to be.

The breadth and complexity of the role demands far more than technical knowledge or previous leadership experience. While those attributes can provide a helpful foundation, they are rarely sufficient on their own. Effectiveness is defined less by what elected officials know when they arrive and more by how they approach the role: knowing when to listen, how to work with others, and how to navigate competing interests while remaining focused on the public good.

THE CHANGING REALITY OF ELECTED OFFICE

Participants shared a striking perspective on public service. They spoke candidly about the pressures of the role, including the intense scrutiny that accompanies public office and the personal sacrifices it often requires. Yet almost without exception, they also described serving on council as an immense privilege. Many regarded it as one of the most rewarding chapters of their lives, reflecting on the opportunity to drive impact in their communities and contribute to something larger than themselves.

The environment in which elected officials serve, however, has evolved considerably. Public service has always demanded time, resilience, and commitment. Today, it seems those demands are greater than ever. Public expectations continue to rise amid growing skepticism toward public institutions and increasingly polarized civic discourse, with social media accelerating the pace of local issues and amplifying conflict and misinformation. Local politicians are more visible and accessible than ever before, and residents increasingly expect immediate responses to the challenges facing their communities – even when many of those challenges are systemic in nature and extend well beyond municipal authority.

Those we interviewed worried that these realities may discourage thoughtful, community-minded people from seeking elected office in the future. Strong local government depends on capable people choosing to serve and bringing a diversity of perspectives to the council table in the service of their communities.

LEARNING TO GOVERN

Campaigning and governing require very different skills. Winning an election does not prepare someone to understand technical reports and options, interpret a broad range of legislation, deliberate on multi-million – or, in some municipalities, multi-billion – dollar operating and capital budgets, or build consensus around difficult decisions with people they just recently met and who may have very different interests and priorities.

The transition into office is a humbling period of significant adjustment for most newly elected officials. Many interviewees likened the first few months to “drinking from a firehose” as they learned the structures, processes, and responsibilities of a system of government that has evolved over nearly 200 years. Successful adaptation to elected office often depends on listening carefully, asking thoughtful questions, accepting advice, and being willing to keep listening and learning.

This finding has important implications for municipalities planning to onboard new councils in the coming months. Orientation should be viewed as the starting point, not the culmination, of learning. The most effective councils are supported through ongoing professional development, governance education, mentorship, and opportunities to learn from one another throughout the council term. By the same token, elected officials themselves have a responsibility to invest the time required to understand the role and develop the knowledge and skills needed to deliberate, make informed decisions, and fulfil their responsibilities as members of council. This is how councils build their capacity to govern.

THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

Effective governance depends on relationships. Municipal government is a collaborative form of leadership where decisions are made collectively, not individually. As we heard, this remains true even in a strong mayors environment – there is no substitute for the importance of council working together as a collaborative governing body.

The relationship among members of council is where that begins. Participants drew a clear distinction between disagreement and dysfunction. Debate is expected and healthy in the pursuit of better decision-making; personal conflict is not. Effective councils respectfully challenge ideas, accept the outcome of a vote, and continue working together. The culture of council is shaped by the conduct of every elected official, with the mayor playing a particularly important leadership role as head of council. This culture extends beyond the council chamber. Residents take their cues from elected officials, and the standards councils set for themselves help shape the tone of civic discourse within the community.

The same principle applies to the relationship between council and administration. Trust, mutual respect, and a clear understanding of the distinct roles of council and staff distinguish municipalities that govern effectively from those where conflict becomes a barrier to progress. Elected officials rely on staff for professional advice, while staff rely on council to establish priorities and make policy decisions.

Maintaining that distinction, however, has become more difficult. Amid growing public expectations, elected officials – as the public face of the municipality – are frequently held to account for everything from individual service requests to broad municipal challenges. That pressure can draw members of council toward operational matters, blurring the distinction between governance and administration and placing strain on council-staff relationships.

The interviews also pointed to an opportunity to better support elected officials in today's public environment. Meaningful performance reporting and timely advice, alongside enhanced communications and issues management capacity,

can help council respond more confidently to public concerns without becoming drawn into day-to-day operations.

Equipped with the right information, elected officials are better positioned to communicate the municipality's work, helping build public understanding and confidence while strengthening the collaborative relationship between council and the administration. In turn, this reinforces the distinct roles of council and administration, empowering both to fulfil their respective responsibilities more effectively.

Guidance for a New Term of Council

As Ontario approaches the 2026 municipal election, these interviews offer some guidance for everyone involved in local government.

For candidates:

Campaign in the same manner you intend to govern. The relationships formed during an election often shape the next four years. Seek office with humility, integrity, and respect. The tone set during an election can carry forward into the work of council.

For elected officials:

Leadership is demonstrated as much through conduct as it is through decisions. Every member is responsible and accountable for how council conducts itself as a governing body. Invest in the relationships that make collective decision-making possible and remember that every interaction contributes to both the effectiveness of council and public trust in local democracy.

“You get to decide what kind of councillor you want to be.”

For municipal administrations:

Help create the conditions for effective governance by investing in the tools, information, and organizational capacity that enable council to proactively respond to public concerns and work constructively with the administration to achieve shared goals and community outcomes. Trust between council and administration is built deliberately and sustained over time.

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Running for Office



Introduction

Elected officials were asked to reflect on their initial decision to run for municipal office, including what it felt like to campaign for the first time and what they wished they had known before entering the process. For some, this was a recent experience; for others, it required looking back decades. Across interviews, we heard not only about the mechanics of campaigning, but also the personal decision to step forward and the vulnerability that comes with entering public life.

A consistent theme emerged: campaigning and governing require fundamentally different skillsets, yet success in the former is a prerequisite for participating in the latter.

This section offers a “behind the curtain” view of municipal campaigns. Many participants described a steep learning curve when they first ran, noting that much of what matters in a campaign is not formally taught, but learned through experience. They spoke candidly about the realities of asking for support, building name recognition, and establishing credibility as a legitimate candidate in their communities.

While campaign approaches have evolved, especially with the rapid expansion of social media, the fundamentals haven’t really changed. Direct, personal engagement – being yourself and having real conversations with residents about what matters to them – still matters more than anything else.

MAKING THE DECISION

Deciding to run for office is a deeply personal choice, and participants described a range of motivations for entering municipal politics.

In many cases, the decision was less about pursuing a political career and more about responding to a moment, an issue, or encouragement from others.

“It was not a straight line for me and not something I thought about doing.”

For some, candidacy was not initially part of a longer-term goal or strategy. These individuals were often already active in their communities – through volunteer work or as local business owners and professionals – and were encouraged by neighbours, colleagues, and sometimes their own family members to “throw their hat in the ring.” Running for office was often framed as a natural next step in a journey of growing community involvement, rather than a long-standing ambition.

“[The current local councillor] invited me for coffee, and I thought they would ask me to help with communications, but they asked me to run for office!”

“I got asked ‘please run for council, it’s a mess,’ and I succumbed.”

Others were motivated by specific local issues or experiences that directly affected them or their families. New local developments, school closures, road safety concerns, and gaps in community amenities prompted a shift from engagement to action for several of our interviewees, as they sought a more direct role in local decision-making.

“My story is that there wasn’t a stop sign at the end of my street and I thought there should be. I started going to council and I convinced myself that I could contribute. That’s how I started – with a stop sign!”

For some, this shift reflected a desire to move from talking about problems – big, small, and everything in between – to doing something about them. For these individuals, they needed to practice what they preached.

“Do I want to just share my opinions for the rest of my life, or do I want to be part of the solution and advance the thing that I’m wagging my finger at other people to fix?”

“I had this itch to do something different, change things, and use my skills for good. Another part of it was that we need more women in politics. And I thought, I’m a woman, why can’t I do this? I turned the mirror onto myself.”

A smaller number of participants described a more intentional pathway, often shaped by prior experience in politics or government. This included people who had worked on political campaigns, served in political offices, or previously run for office at the provincial or federal levels. These experiences provided early exposure to the realities of political life and helped build both confidence and familiarity with the process. For this group, municipal office was not a first entry point, but part of a broader trajectory of political engagement and public service.

“I’ve always been politically engaged and interested...after university, I got involved with a provincial leadership race and served as a youth chair.”

“I started as a volunteer and then worked in an MPP’s office. I went from that office to a mayor’s office, where I learned a lot about municipal government. I liked that sector more because it was issue-by-issue and non-partisan.”

While there’s no single “right” reason to run for office, several interviewees cautioned that some motivations might lead prospective candidates down a path of little reward. Notably, they cautioned against running to serve your own ego or “gain power” in a way that is more about personal ambition than public service.

“Do it because you want to make your community a better place. Do it for the right reasons.”

While the work of local public office is meaningful, it is rarely accompanied by the glory of public validation and recognition. As we heard it, candidates would be wise to keep their expectations low in this regard.

“If you are motivated [to run] by extrinsic praise, you won’t get it and you may become very sad and may take it personally.”

Elected officials emphasized the importance (and virtue) of patience. Change at the municipal level is, more often than not, incremental. Some suggested those seeking and expecting quick wins may find serving in local elected office frustrating and suggested that other avenues of engagement may be better suited to those seeking more immediate results.

In the end, across all pathways, the transition from private citizen to candidate was described as significant. Participants emphasized that putting their name on the ballot required a leap of faith into the public sphere, often without fully understanding what the role – or campaigning – might entail.

“I think you don’t know what you don’t know.”

From Councillor to Mayor

For many participants, becoming mayor was not part of an initial plan, but a decision shaped by circumstance.

Most mayors interviewed had previously served as councillors. When considering a run for head of council, several described being encouraged by their colleagues around the horseshoe to step forward, particularly when an incumbent chose not to seek re-election.

“The previous mayor told me, ‘I’m not going to run again and you better think about who it’s going to be if it’s not you or me.’ That’s why I ran for mayor...It was completely unexpected.”

“All my political career, I thought I’d just be a councillor...then two councillors came to me and said they thought I needed to run for mayor. At first I said, ‘I don’t think so,’ but they were insistent.”

Others described stepping forward because no one else had committed to running or because they were concerned about the experience and preparedness of those who had entered the race.

“I talked to council and no one else wanted to run for mayor. And the people putting their names forward? I was like, ‘I’m sure you’re good people, but you have no experience.’”

Across these accounts, the decision to run for mayor was often shaped less by long-term ambition and more by timing and how the playing field was shaking out in the moment.



RUNNING A CAMPAIGN

If the decision to run is complicated, campaigning is where the real work begins. For most elected officials, campaigning was one of the most challenging and intimidating aspects of entering municipal politics.

Campaigning requires a significant investment of time and energy (and a solid pair of shoes for the door-knocking!), often on top of existing professional and personal responsibilities. Words used to describe campaigning included “difficult”, “a grind,” “exhausting”, and “uncomfortable.”

Municipal campaigns place heavy pressures on candidates, in part due to their length. Under the *Municipal Elections Act, 1996*, nominations may be filed beginning May 1 in the year of the election

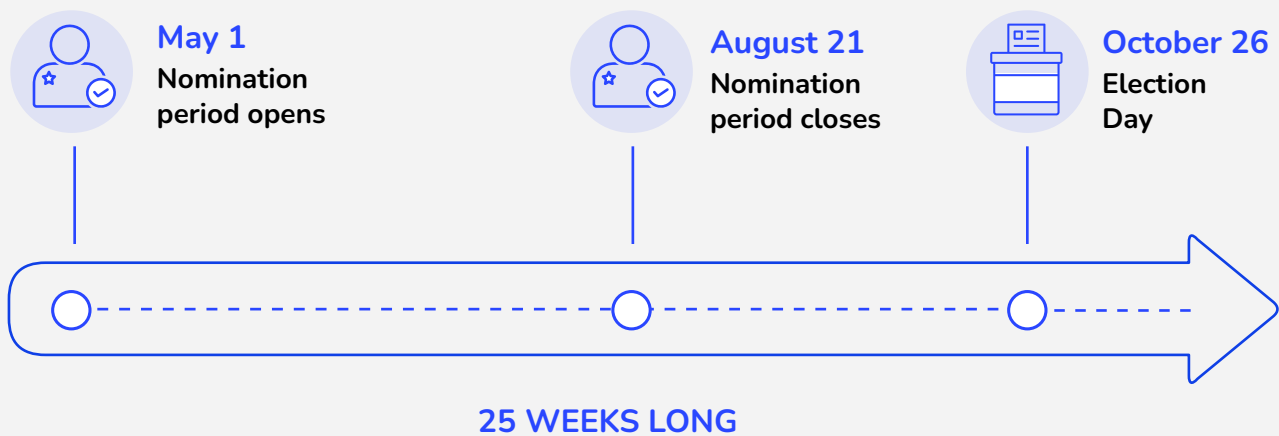
and must be submitted by Nomination Day, the third Friday in August.⁵ Voting Day for Ontario municipal elections is held on the fourth Monday in October. As a result, candidates who file early may be actively campaigning for nearly six months.⁶

“I was working 16–18 hour days...I was always tired and I was mentally exhausted.”

This is substantially longer than the campaign period of provincial and federal elections, which typically last a little more than a month. Accordingly, municipal candidates must sustain their time, energy, and effort over a much longer period, without the party infrastructure and financial support available in partisan politics. The question, then, is how successful candidates navigate these demands and what lessons can be drawn from their experiences.

“It’s safe to say I had zero clue about what I was doing.”

The Campaign Window for the 2026 Elections



⁵ *Municipal Elections Act, 1996*, s. 33(4).

⁶ *Municipal Elections Act, 1996*, s. 5(1).

Learning by doing: It seems that there is no way to fully prepare for a campaign. While some candidates entered the race with strong community ties or experience from volunteering with past political campaigns, most found themselves learning on the fly once the campaign began. Campaigning often involved trial and error, with candidates figuring things out as they went.

Build your support team: The good news is that campaigning is not a solitary activity. Many mayors and councillors stressed the importance of asking for help early – from family, colleagues, friends, and volunteers. People are often more willing to support a campaign than expected.

“I had a friend of mine who once said, ‘If you ever decide to run for office, I will be your campaign manager’ and then I said I was running. She and her husband, who were newly retired, were amazing...she was the mastermind behind the keyboard.”

Several participants highlighted the value of drawing on existing networks, reaching out to individuals with experience in politics, business, or community organizations for advice, introductions, and support. In some cases, this led to the formation of core campaign teams, including organizers and volunteers who helped develop campaign strategies and activation plans, coordinate canvassers, develop campaign collateral, and manage the logistical elements of a campaign.

Knock on doors: The most consistent factor in successful campaigns was simple: getting out and talking to people. Direct, face-to-face conversations with people were described as the most effective way to build name recognition and trust among residents.

“If you want to win, you need to meet people and put yourself out there and have awkward, uncomfortable, and challenging conversations.”

While social media and other modern communications tools can help raise awareness or amplify visibility, they are no substitute for in-person engagement with residents, local business owners, and community leaders and connectors.

We heard that campaign victories – particularly those involving challengers unseating incumbents – were often secured by the candidates who spent the most whatever campaign time they had speaking directly with residents. Notably, while longer campaigns provide more time to build momentum, even shorter campaigns can be effective if candidates focus their efforts strategically, meaning that they hit the pavement and talk to people.

“Whoever knocks on the most doors wins.”

Active listening: Engaging with voters isn’t simply about presenting yourself and your ideas, but about listening. Rather than treating door-knocking as a one-sided pitch, many mayors and councillors described it as an opportunity to better understand community issues from diverse vantage points and where people wanted to see change.

“[The campaign] was an opportunity to talk to residents and get a pulse of the community.”

These conversations offer a two-way benefit. They provide candidates with valuable, first-hand insight into local concerns and resident perspectives, while also helping to build more meaningful and memorable connections within the community. In many cases, these personal connections extended beyond the campaign itself; some noted that people they met at the door became long-time supporters.

“I wanted to run a participatory campaign. I wanted people to feel involved in their community.”

To platform or not to platform? If door-knocking was a clear “yes” among interviewees, views were more mixed on whether candidates should develop a formal platform. Some argued that a platform helps clarify why you are running and can serve as a “north star” once elected, providing direction and helping to maintain focus on key priorities.

“I was one of the few people who had an actual platform, and I tell people when you’re running, have a reason.”

“When I ran for mayor, my platform was very explicit and detailed – in hindsight, too detailed.”

Others, however, questioned the value of detailed platforms in a municipal context. Candidates may be known for their affiliation with political parties that exist at senior governments, but they do not formally run under a party banner. In some municipalities, informal slates exist. This may be as simple as the sense that a candidate is part of “the mayor’s team.” In other cases, like-minded candidates may support each other on shared issues. But once elected, each councillor is just one vote on council.

“You campaigned on a platform, but chances are that you don’t have the capacity or support around the table to do it.”

As a result, participants noted that it can be difficult to deliver on specific commitments in the same way as at other levels of government. Instead, many described running on a set of core values, allowing their priorities to be shaped through conversations with residents during the campaign, rather than committing to a specific policy agenda in advance.

“I didn’t think about what would get me elected, but what motivated me to do it. Then I would explain to people why I thought those were the right things.”



“I didn’t have a platform per se, but I had my values and listened to what was important to people at the doors and from the themes that emerged.”

Quite apart from the question of whether to develop a platform, elected officials also highlighted the risks of making firm commitments during a campaign. Several noted that candidates sometimes campaign on issues outside of municipal jurisdiction, or make assurances in conversations with residents that are difficult – or even impossible – to uphold once in office.

“When I was canvassing, I talked to some people who told me about an issue they were facing, and I agreed with them at the door. Well, once I was elected and the issue came to council, I didn’t agree with them at all. I had only heard half the story. Once I got all of the information, I actually called them and admitted that I was wrong...I remember making that call and it was a very difficult call to make. I never made a promise like that again.”

These insights suggest that while platforms can provide clarity to voters, they must be grounded in a realistic understanding of the municipal role and its limitations. Whether formal or informal, commitments made during a campaign carry forward into office, and candidates may need to contend with the repercussions of those promises.

Being yourself and holding true to your

values: Participants stressed the importance of authenticity and staying grounded in their values. Recent research suggests that voters respond positively to politicians who appear genuine and relatable, rather than overly scripted or polished.⁷ Among those we interviewed, many attributed their success to being honest about who they were, what they stood for, and why they were running.

While feedback from residents was seen as an important input, participants emphasized that campaigns must be grounded in the candidate's own values and motivations. This was described not only as a matter of principle, but also a means of maintaining focus and resilience during a physically, mentally, and emotionally demanding process.

“First thing I asked myself was ‘do I want to do this and why?’ Frankly, part of that was saying to myself if people don’t like my reasons for running, then pick someone else.”

Several participants framed their campaign as a test of alignment between their values and those of their community, rather than a referendum on them as individuals. Whether they were running for the first time or long-time incumbents, this perspective helped them manage the uncertainty of the outcome and remain comfortable with the possibility of losing, knowing they had not compromised on what mattered most.

Getting comfortable with discomfort: Many interviewees shared that campaigning did not come naturally to them. In particular, they described door-knocking and asking for support – and, even more so, donations – as intimidating.

“People can be pretty harsh...you need to have thick skin.”

For many, campaigning required going outside their comfort zones and it seems that the discomfort does not necessarily ease with experience – many still find campaigning difficult, even after multiple elections.

“I’ve knocked on doors so many times and I still think it sucks.”

“Putting yourself out there and asking for votes is a totally different skillset than doing the work of being on council. Then you come up on re-election and you think, I don’t want to do that again. But you do, and you have to throw yourself back into it.”

These comments serve as an important reminder that campaigning and governing require different skills. Feeling uncomfortable with the campaign process does not mean someone is not well-suited to serve on council; it is simply part of the role.

“As a woman, we are not socialized to go on every conversation as a sales pitch...I got good at it at the end, but the most terrifying thing was knocking on strangers’ doors until I got comfortable.”

“It’s great to tell 20 people at a party what you stand for. It’s a different ballgame telling 30,000 people.”

In sum, the greatest success factor for a candidate? Do the work. Put in the time. Talk to your potential constituents. Begin to understand community issues and priorities. Show people who you are.

“It only costs \$100 to sign up and then people don’t do the work.”

⁷ Victor Valgarðsson et al, “[The Good Politician: Competence, Integrity and Authenticity in Seven Democracies](#),” *Political Studies* 73, no. 2 (May 2025): 631–656; Lori Turnbull, “[Leadership and the Politics of Authenticity](#),” *Policy Magazine: Canadian Politics and Public Policy*, February 28, 2023.

So, You Lost – What Happens Now?

While our discussions were, by definition, with successful candidates, several interviewees reflected on earlier campaigns where they did not win, and how those experiences shaped their approach to public service.

For some, their first campaign ended in a loss to an incumbent, a particularly difficult hurdle to overcome in local politics. Incumbents continue to enjoy a significant electoral advantage. In the 2022 Ontario municipal election, 80 per cent of incumbents who sought re-election were successful, compared to just 28.5 per cent of first-time candidates.⁸

“You learn a lot when you lose.”

For some, losing was disappointing but clarifying. It provided an opportunity to reflect on their motivations and better understand the needs and expectations of their communities. Some became more involved locally following an election loss – volunteering in the community or attending council and community meetings to understand key issues, how local government works, and how decisions are made. These initial campaigns, even if unsuccessful, were seen as valuable learning experiences that positioned them more strongly for future runs.

“I lost my first election...but I worked really hard and realized I’m actually pretty good at this.”

Maintaining perspective is critical. To be sure, campaigns require a sizeable investment of time and energy, and the outcome can feel deeply personal. However, losing should not be taken as a personal failure, but as a reflection of misalignment between a candidate’s message and the priorities of voters in a given moment. It may be a signal that the timing or circumstances were

not right. Those who were able to separate the result from their sense of self were better able to process the experience and, in some cases, re-engage in public life.

“I learned a lot. It was disheartening to lose but very encouraging. So, I spent the next four years organizing and getting ready. I was motivated to run again.”

A common thread exists across these reflections: losing an election can be a formative part of a political journey.



⁸ AMO, [2022 Municipal Post-Election Data](#).

SECTION 02

You're in Office,
Now What?



Introduction

Winning an election marks the beginning of a steep transition into office. While campaigning requires candidates to introduce themselves to their communities and earn public trust, entering office brings an entirely new set of responsibilities, pressures, and expectations.

Across interviews, elected officials consistently described the role as larger, more complex, and more demanding than anticipated. Previously, most understood municipal politics primarily through its visible dimensions: council meetings, public debates and votes, and ribbon cuttings. What surprised many was the sheer breadth of the role beyond the council chamber.

The early months in office can be both exciting and disorienting. New members of council are expected to make consequential decisions, absorb vast amounts of information, and quickly develop an understanding of how their municipality operates. Along the way, many encounter surprises that reshape their understanding of local government—and of the role they have taken on.



UNPREPARED

Elected officials varied considerably in how well they understood the role before taking office.

Generally, those with prior experience in politics or government or those who had been highly active and engaged in the community indicated they entered office with a stronger understanding of municipal government and their role. Several felt this experience was an advantage and helped them avoid feeling completely overwhelmed in the early days of the role...for the most part.



“You don’t ever understand the role until you’re in it.”

“I came in with a pretty good background compared to a lot of other people walking into the building the first time.”

“I knew a lot about government and public policy and the way it functioned because of my time in government and at two municipalities.”

That said, even those who came in with some understanding or prior exposure to local politics were surprised by how much they didn’t know, and it sometimes required them to check their egos and be open to learning. Others readily admitted that they did not have a strong grasp of what the role meant or what it would look like.

“I had surface knowledge...but the true depth of the amount of work? I had no idea!”

“I understood conceptually, but when I dug into the day-to-day, I was surprised and it took me off guard...I thought I had a leg up on everyone else.”

THE BIG SURPRISES: WHEN EXPECTATIONS MEET REALITY

“There was a lot more to learn than I ever dreamt there was.”

While everyone we interviewed entered office with different expectations, several common themes emerged when reflecting on what surprised them most once elected.

For some, it was the pace and volume of the work. For others, it was the rules they were now beholden to or the realization that municipal government is often more constrained than residents understand. These reflections offer a glimpse into the experience of public office that is often difficult to appreciate from the outside.

“The first few years you’re like a deer in headlights. It takes time to step into your power.”

Growing into the role: First-time officeholders are typically eager to hit the ground running. In politics and the private sector alike, there is a common refrain that the first 100 days are the most important for new leaders. But in the municipal sector, this benchmark might be closer to the first 500 days!

Participants cautioned against the assumption that the ability to effect change begins on day one, sharing that it takes anywhere from a year to eighteen months for a new member of council to fully get their bearings and become effective in the role. In fact, a four-year term often proves shorter than expected once the initial transition, relationship-building, and eventual lead-up to the next election are taken into account.

“It takes you at least 1.5 years to learn the ropes – and then you’ve got 1.5 years to get things done – and then you’re down to the last 6 months before the election.”

Naturally, confidence increases with time in role. What feels initially unsettling, uncomfortable, or even like imposter syndrome can gradually evolve into a stronger sense of competency and belonging.

“When I started, I didn’t know what I was doing. But one day, I realized that I can do this job and do it well. This was a huge moment of realization for me. I do belong in this room, and I have something to offer.”

The breadth of municipal responsibilities: For many, the role of a municipal elected official is more complicated than they anticipated. Even those coming into the position with some knowledge or prior experience reflected that they had grossly underestimated the breadth of issues and responsibilities they were expected to address.

“You forget about all the things municipalities do...I didn’t understand the broad scope.”

Some admitted they had not fully appreciated the size of municipal budgets, the scope of operations, or the extent to which local governments are responsible for delivering critical day-to-day services: maintaining safe roads, providing clean drinking water, and determining design guidelines for new developments, to name a few. The difficulty of quickly becoming conversant and knowledgeable in complex technical matters – enough to make informed, sound decisions – was widely shared.

“Learning how a city works was a lot. It has been described as a fire hose to the face and that’s a good description.”



“I had no idea I’d have to read that much to make a decision.”

“The first time I saw a water report I was overwhelmed because I didn’t know what I was supposed to look for.”

Compounding the challenge is timing. Municipal elections are held in the fall, meaning newly elected officials have only been in office for a matter of weeks before being asked to make decisions on some of the most significant items a council will consider, including the municipality’s operating and capital budgets.

Municipalities do a lot, but their limitations can serve as an unwelcome surprise: One of the more difficult realizations for many newly elected officials was that municipalities are increasingly expected to respond to complex social, economic, and health-related challenges without necessarily having the jurisdiction, resources, or authority to fully address them.

“I think everybody who runs for the first time gets elected and thinks they’re going to accomplish everything under the sun, but it’s not possible.”

In general, local governments in Ontario possess significantly broader authority than they once did. Reforms introduced in 2006 to the Municipal Act, 2001 expanded municipal powers considerably, granting municipalities broad authority to “provide any service or thing that the municipality considers necessary or desirable for the public.”⁹ Over the years, municipalities have also been given wider by-law-making authority in areas such as the “economic, social and environmental

well-being of the municipality, including respecting climate change” and the “health, safety and well-being of persons.”¹⁰ Yet, these expanded responsibilities have not been matched with additional or enhanced financial capacity or policy tools to support implementation.

“I might have known it intellectually but didn’t truly register how much you are a creature of the province.”

Reconciling what municipalities are expected to do with what they are actually equipped to do becomes an early lesson in the realities of Ontario’s system of local government for many new members of council.

While local governments are the closest and most accessible level of government to residents, this proximity can also mean municipalities become the default destination for frustrations tied to broader systemic issues. As a result, mayors and councillors must contend with the tension of being both accountable and constrained, which features as a recurring theme throughout this report.

“I keep joking that Parks and Recreation is not fictional...I understood the challenges of municipal government, but I didn’t understand how constrained we are by the province.”

⁹ Municipal Act, 2001, s.10(1).

¹⁰ Municipal Act, 2001, s.11(2). Note that Bill 68, *Modernizing Ontario’s Municipal Legislation Act*, 2017 amended Paragraph 5 of Section 11(2) to explicitly authorize municipalities to create by-laws regarding climate change.

How (many) rules there are to learn: Another surprise for many participants was the sheer number of procedural rules and formal processes that shape how council operates. Many expected debate and decision-making, but did not fully appreciate how extensively council meetings are governed by procedural by-laws, rules of order, legislative requirements, and established administrative processes.

“I had to ask what ‘through the chair’ meant and I asked a lot of questions about procedure and bylaws. I was like, ‘I don’t know what I’m voting for here!’”

“I had to learn procedural rules myself, by watching.”

Some shared how difficult it can be to draft appropriate motions and work within procedural requirements to advance policy issues or ideas through the system of government. While most (though not all) interviewees attended orientation sessions or introductory training on procedural rules after taking office, several reflected that it took time and practical experience – and direct support from their clerks and supporting staff – to become comfortable navigating them effectively.

“Wait...I Have to Bow Before Leaving the Room?”

Several newcomers were caught off guard by the formalities, protocols, and etiquette that surround local government. From how members address one another to procedural customs and decorum in council chambers, municipal politics can feel unexpectedly formal and, at times, a little strange.

“The way staff spoke to me kind of caught me off guard...The respect... they called me councillor.”

Particularly notable is the use of formal titles of address by municipal staff to preserve professional boundaries and political neutrality. Such conventions help reinforce the distinct roles of council and staff: elected officials set direction and make decisions, while staff provide professional advice and implement those decisions.

“Everyone calls me mayor... and I told the CAO you can call me [my name], but they said that’s not a good practice.”

That said, even years later, after reconciling themselves to many of the distinct formalities and ceremonial traditions, some conventions still felt surprisingly rigid.

“I was surprised by the formality and the colonial nature of council meetings. You have to bow before you go to the bathroom. When you come in with fresh eyes, it’s really weird.”

The pace of government: One of the first things many new members of council discover is how deliberate – and for some, slow-moving – the process of local government can be.

“I have examples of things I initiated on my first day, my first vote on council that took seven years to actually land.”

Before taking office, several assumed that good ideas would naturally move forward if there were clear evidence or broad public and council support behind them. What they learned was that advancing even relatively straightforward initiatives can require years of discussion, consultation, studies, reports, due diligence, and political negotiation before tangible results are achieved.

“You think it’s a good idea and want to get it done but you’ve got to slow down if you have headwinds or resistance.”

The slow(er) pace of municipal government can be frustrating for both elected officials and residents. Yet, several interviewees argued that this pace is also a fundamental feature of effective and democratic decision-making, particularly in a system where decisions require collaboration, public input, transparency, and long-term planning.

“We always think that, like TV, the mayor gives a speech and everyone agrees, but it’s not the way the world works...it is slowly but surely.”

Council’s role in governance vs. operations:

Understanding where the role of council ends and the responsibilities of municipal staff begin proved to be a significant adjustment for many first-time elected officials. Some assumed they would play a much larger role in operations and service delivery.

“I quite honestly didn’t understand the importance of the division between staff and council... I thought that you know you would be more part of the day-to-day stuff. I really did... you’d be able to give input on how to do things. Why don’t we sweep the streets this way? Why are those picnic tables there?”

For some, this meant calibrating expectations around how quickly they could intervene in local issues or direct action within the organization. Understanding these boundaries early on in the council term ultimately made them more effective in office, helping them focus more on setting direction, building consensus, and advancing policy priorities through appropriate channels.

“I would say, ‘Our infrastructure staff need to do this’...and [my CAO] was able to lay out for me, ‘This is your space and this is mine.’”

This distinction is not always easy to apply or adhere to in practice. As discussed in Section 5, the boundary between governance and administration sits at the heart of the council–staff relationship and can become a source of tension and misunderstanding.

The public nature of the role: Just how public service is surprised many. Several members of council reflected that before taking office, they understood the visibility associated with politics in theory but did not fully appreciate the extent to which they would become constantly accessible and scrutinized in their day-to-day lives.

“I feel like the minute I leave my driveway, I’m in the public eye.”

Few anticipated the full collapsing of their public and personal lives once in office. They mentioned being approached regularly in grocery stores, restaurants, community events, places of worship, and even during personal or family moments. There is a sense that the role follows them everywhere.

“My 8-year-old had a birthday party and a mom texted back...‘by the way I’m with a gymnastics club and we’re looking for space.’ And it was kind of icky.”

“Two weeks ago, I was at a funeral and the person in front of me raised a municipal issue. People do not have any boundaries as to what my job is or when I should be doing it.”

Our discussions revealed an unexpected paradox: while public office can bring elected officials closer to the day-to-day realities (and people) in their communities, it can also create a growing sense of separation from ordinary life. Interviewees reflected that once elected, interactions with neighbours, acquaintances, and even friends often became filtered through the lens of their council position.

“Here’s what I didn’t know. I didn’t realize how alienated from community you are no matter how hard you try. People perceive you differently – even friends...I’m not me anymore, I’m a councillor.”

Several also reflected on the pressures of learning the job in the public arena. Unlike many professions where mistakes and learning opportunities happen behind the scenes, elected officials navigate this process while under constant public observation.

“There’s probably one thousand hours of me eating sandwiches and making weird faces online.”

There is a sense of being constantly under the microscope, with officials feeling more “on display” than ever due to the recording and livestreaming of meetings, in addition to frequent appearances at public events. Even casual moments now become part of the public record.

“I have to think about what my face is doing in public, even if you have a kind interaction.”

“You’re learning while you’re in the public realm and yet you’re a newbie and no one cuts you any slack.”

In the end, many participants came to view and internalize this level of access as an inherent part of public service. Even so, several emphasized that the extent to which the role permeates everyday life is often underestimated by those considering running for office and can come as a profound shock.



SECTION
03
Living the Role



Introduction

What happens after the onboarding ends and elected officials begin to find their footing? Beyond learning how to do the job is the experience of living it over a four-year term.

Public office is often discussed in terms of elections, policies, and decisions. Yet much of the experience of serving in local government lies elsewhere: in the relationships that are built, the pressures that are absorbed, the demands on time and family, and the ongoing responsibility of representing a community.

The elected officials we interviewed spoke candidly about both the rewards and challenges of the role. They described the satisfaction of seeing ideas become reality in their communities and assisting residents as well as the emotional demands, growing workloads, and personal sacrifices that accompany elected office.

Just as importantly, they spoke about what makes the role sustainable – where they find support, how they maintain perspective, and what resources might be needed to help current and future elected officials succeed. Their experiences raise important questions about how we encourage more people to seek public office and ensure they can thrive once they get there.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF PUBLIC OFFICE



“Public service should not come at the cost of your personal safety, mental health, bodily health.”

Throughout our conversations, we asked elected officials to reflect on their time in local government. While many described the role as deeply meaningful and rewarding, they also emphasized that the emotional, mental, and personal dimensions of the work are difficult to appreciate fully before taking office and can, at times, be difficult to bear.

Delivering community impact: Across the board, mayors and councillors are energized by the opportunity to make tangible differences in people’s lives and contribute directly to their communities.¹¹

“I’ve been able to be a part of something that has made people’s lives better.”

Municipal government offers a uniquely immediate and intimate connection to residents and community issues. Elected officials get the satisfaction of seeing the visible results of their contributions, whether through infrastructure improvements, community programs, resident supports, or policy changes.

“We were able to help someone keep their housing and people in the community feel well-represented and that their voice is being heard.”

¹¹ This is consistent with findings from the Canadian Municipal Barometer, which found that elected officials most value their ability to “make a difference, to act for the common good, and to participate in the future of the municipality” as part of their role. Canadian Municipal Barometer, [“What do Councillors and Mayors Like and Dislike About Their Job?”](#) December 20, 2024.

Several emphasized that much of the work of local government happens through collaboration and community-building, not the efforts of any single individual. One of the most important dimensions of the role of a public officeholder is to facilitate connections and build bridges by bringing together residents, organizations, businesses, community groups, and municipal staff to drive shared goals and initiatives.

“I really like being a connector...meeting different people doing things in the community and realizing they should know each other. Maybe they can do something amazing.”

Many derive meaning from empowering others within their community. Some of the most fulfilling moments in public service come from enabling residents and local organizations to advance their own ideas and initiatives. Success in local government can often be about the small wins that make a big difference, rather than major policy achievements or headline-making projects.

“When I help someone with a passion and I watch it happen and watch the community benefit...that to me is the most fulfilling piece.”

The emotional weight of the role: Public office may be rewarding work, but it also carries emotional demands on those who serve. If we heard earlier that the heightened visibility associated with elected office came as a surprise to many, the greater challenge for some has been the emotional responsibility that comes with being constantly available to residents, absorbing community frustrations, and navigating increasingly polarized public discourse.

“Essentially managing other people’s emotions is hard.”

Municipal officials often become the target of blame and anger for issues such as homelessness, mental health, and substance use, even though the policy tools, funding, and authority needed to address these challenges largely rest with other orders of government. Interviewees told us about receiving calls from residents in crisis and wanting to help but feeling handcuffed by jurisdictional boundaries and limited resources.

“I knew the hardest part would be not being able to fix a broken system.”

While the mismatch of municipal authority and municipal capacity is well-understood within the sector, residents often assume elected officials can directly intervene in or quickly resolve problems – that the roots of these challenges are a lack of political will. In reality, impactful solutions are frequently constrained by significant procedural, legal, financial, and institutional limitations.

The changing tone of public discourse and local politics: Many conversations also touched on the topic of rising incivility in local government. Participants described a political environment that has become increasingly toxic and distrustful in recent years, with COVID-19 serving as an important turning point.

These concerns are not new, nor are they unique to the individuals interviewed for this report. Similar findings have been documented in previous iterations of StrategyCorp’s Annual CAO Survey, as well as in research conducted by the Canadian Municipal Barometer Project, the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario (AMCTO), and other organizations examining the state of local democracy and civic participation.¹²

¹² StrategyCorp, [2025 Ontario Municipal Chief Administrative Officer Survey](#) and [2024 Ontario Municipal Chief Administrative Officer Survey](#); Canadian Municipal Barometer. “[Harassment in Municipal Politics: Experiences of Local Politicians](#),” March 7, 2025; Association of Municipal Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario (AMCTO), [Addressing Municipal Harassment & Incivility Key Findings](#); AMO, [Healthy Democracy Project](#).

“You say ‘politician’ like it’s a dirty word but I’m a human being...the people around the table have lost parents and had babies.”

This increasingly inflammatory and polarized public discourse has intensified the emotional pressures associated with serving in public office. Hostile messages, conspiracy-driven rhetoric, and increasingly personal attacks have become common features of contemporary local political life. Many elected officials feel as though they are being treated less like people every day.

“When people don’t let things go and just keep coming back it’s almost harassment, to be honest. I’m sorry you’re unhappy but I’ve done all I can.”

For some, these tensions have escalated into threats and concerns for personal safety. These concerns are regrettably now part of the reality of holding local public office.

“COVID was so divided and people were afraid and isolated. That’s when the first of the substantial death threats came.”



“I was given a key fob in case someone tried to throw me into a trunk.”

Incivility and harassment are also not experienced equally. Women, younger members of council, LGBTQ+ representatives, and racialized leaders often face more personal and identity-based forms of abuse, particularly online. Such attacks go beyond disagreement over ideas and instead target their appearance, identity, credibility, or right to hold office.

“White men don’t get that...they get the death threats, but [women] get the death threats with a side order of other garbage that is very personal to your identity.”

Several interviewees worry that the tone of public discourse is making local political engagement less desirable and sustainable. There is also concern that it may discourage thoughtful or community-minded individuals from seeking office in the future.

“[The incivility] discourages people who want to be in elected office and are already underrepresented — they bear a bigger burden and pay a higher price.”

“Social media is a cesspool, and I try to avoid it.”

Social media has amplified and accelerated many of these dynamics. While online platforms can help elected officials communicate directly with residents and remain accessible, they also expose officials to criticism, misinformation, and personal attacks at a scale and intensity that previous generations of local politicians did not experience. The internet moves quickly.

“Facebook has been one of the worst inventions in the history of the world for politicians and kids.”

Of course, members of the public are not the only source of incivility or poor conduct. Participants also reflected on situations where interpersonal conflict originated within council itself. We return to this challenge in Section 4.

Establishing boundaries: While the individuals we interviewed remain deeply committed to serving their communities, they shared that resilience, perspective, and personal boundaries are critical to sustaining oneself in the role over time.

For some, this has meant intentionally limiting engagement with online political discourse — avoiding debates on social media sites or turning off comments, for example.

“I don’t debate in the media or on social media. That’s a mistake some of my colleagues have made and it consumes you.”

Online boundaries are critical, but so too are the coping mechanisms elected officials deploy in order to prevent the role from becoming all-consuming. Many are consciously working hard to separate their personal and political lives to support their mental health and maintain their sense of self.

“Part of the thing for me is keeping the st out of my head because if I read something before I go to bed I’m screwed.”**

Strong personal and professional support systems also help members of council manage the pressures of the job. Spouses, family members, trusted friends, fellow councillors, and peers from other municipalities were all described as critical sources of encouragement and support.

“When I was elected, [another mayor] reached out and said, ‘how can I help you?’ At some point not too far in my term, we had a couple of meetings she said, ‘what do you want to ask? How can I help you?’”

Therapy is also a tool used by many elected officials to manage the psychological implications of public service.

“I found a really good therapist who has helped me deal with my own stress...which takes a weird psychological toll.”

For others, the strategy has been to seek resilience in their values, remaining connected to the reasons they sought office in the first place.

“I ran on a set of values and priorities I wrote out. And I have to be able to sleep at night. If I can’t sleep at night, I can’t and won’t do this job anymore.”

“Stick to your values. That’s difficult to do. Sticking to what I do and value – there is pressure every day to compromise them.”

THE WORK BEHIND THE OFFICE

For many we spoke to, one of the most striking realizations after taking office was the sheer intensity and volume of work associated with municipal elected office.

To say the workload is heavy may, in fact, be a gross understatement. What residents most often see publicly represents only a small fraction of the labour involved in local public service.

The meeting load: Behind every meeting is extensive preparation, including review of lengthy agendas and reports, meeting with staff for follow-up discussions, and weighing complex policy options. While council meetings are perhaps the most visible and best-known aspect of local government, participants emphasized that considerable time and effort is often spent on their responsibilities as part of appointments to agencies, boards, and committees (ABCs).

“The job is more than attending two meetings a month...There are other committees and special meetings that need to be called often and it’s not just two hours a month.”

Committee assignments can significantly shape an officeholder’s workload and areas of expertise. Committees focused on planning, budgeting, infrastructure, police services, and public health can be especially demanding due to the technical complexity of the issues involved, volume of materials, and time investment.

“I sit on 50 ABCs. They don’t all meet regularly but half do.”



“I have seen the committee process be used really productively in changing decision-makers’ minds, which is a good thing.”

At the same time, we also heard that committee work is often where some of the most substantive and collaborative discussions in municipal government take place. Committees can serve as spaces where elected officials can engage more deeply with certain topics and work through policy matters in greater detail before they reach the council table.

“I love committee meetings. Not everyone does. It’s a way to get stuff done. Sit at the table, bring a motion forward, get it approved, get the money allocated.”

Some interviewees specifically shared that their roles on regional or county councils are a slog, in part due to the challenge of balancing competing local and regional interests as well as the need to think bigger and across a longer horizon.

“This county position has been the roughest thing I’ve done in my years on council.”

“Because we are upper- and lower-tier, it has created a lot of animosity. It’s been challenging to work with some of the other mayors.”

Beyond the council table: For many members of council, much of the work exists outside the cadence of formal scheduled meetings. Mayors and councillors must always wear multiple hats and be able to move rapidly between technical policy issues, ceremonial duties, issues management and media relations, and constituent casework at any given time, all while keeping the broader work of local government moving forward.

“There’s committees on top of council, there’s events, there’s answering and working with constituents, there’s reading every agenda that is several hundred pages. You have to do a lot of work in the background.”

Unlike many jobs, the work rarely has distinct stopping points. Community concerns continue to exist outside business hours, and email inboxes are never closed. Elected officials told us about feeling a constant sense of responsibility to keep up the pace, chasing a goalpost that keeps moving. In their experience, residents expect the individuals they have elected to be accessible and deeply engaged in community life – attending local events, maintaining an active presence, responding quickly to inquiries.

“When I was a councillor I went to as many community events as possible... Some councillors won’t go to anything.”

Public officeholders are largely responsible for determining how to allocate their own time, attention, and capacity across the various facets of the job. A few acknowledged that some aspects are shaped by their own choices and preferences. In many cases, elected officials can propose or determine their committee assignments or set their own service standard for constituent responses, for example.

“The position is what you put into it...I see councillors who do nothing and some who do a whole lot.”

In general, some elected officials treat the role more narrowly – perhaps for their own valid reasons – while others try to do it all. This variability can sometimes create tensions within council, particularly when some members feel the workload and burden of representation are not being borne equally.

“Sharing the workload is important...I take on more than my fair share, to be honest, and others do one board.”

The “part-time” myth: One of the most significant disconnects is the mismatch between how municipal elected office is formally structured and how it is experienced. The Municipal Act, 2001 contains no formal designation of council positions as full-time or part-time; all heads of council and members have the same statutory responsibilities and powers. In practice, the distinction between full-time and part-time is often inferred from the level of compensation and expectations associated with the role.

While the majority of council positions in Ontario are compensated at levels generally associated with part-time work, participants overwhelmingly described the work as functionally full-time or, at times, impossible to neatly define at all. Indeed, not a single elected official we interviewed felt that the demands of contemporary public service align with any traditional definition of a part-time position.

“I took a huge pay cut and yet took on more work [in elected office].”

“On paper my position is part-time, but the reality is this is a full-time job. I don’t know how this would be part-time.”

For their part, longer serving members of council observed that the workload and expectations associated with elected office have increased considerably over the course of their careers.¹³

“[In my first term] the balance was okay. Councillors were considered part-time and I was working full-time and still had time for council and family, but the demands have certainly changed over the years.”

“I didn’t realize that I would be essentially working full time hours for part-time pay.”

Throughout our interviews, we heard a great deal about the financial barriers associated with part-time pay in many municipalities for what is effectively a full-time job.



¹³ A study by Watson & Associates as part of a Ward Boundary and Council Compensation Review conducted for the City of Guelph in 2020 further acknowledged this trend: “There is a perception that the workload of councillors has been steadily increasing as the complexity of government activity and the expectations of residents have increased. Watson & Associates, [“Full-Time or Part-Time Councillors?”](#) (Special City Council Meeting, November 5, 2020).

Some intimated that the low compensation impacts their quality of life. We heard from members of council struggling with the rising cost of living and housing affordability in the very communities they represent.

Such financial considerations are further amplified by the realities of the role itself, which make maintaining outside employment extremely difficult, given the prevalence of daytime meetings, weekend community events, and the unpredictability of constituent requests. For some, balancing elected office alongside another job often comes at a personal and professional cost and is not sustainable in the long term.



“Council is absolutely a full-time job, and I knew that from the beginning. That’s why I didn’t say I would keep my [professional] position indefinitely.”

“Don’t think you can have a full-time job and do this on the side of the desk.”

The growing expectations of public service, combined with relatively modest compensation, have sparked concerns about who is realistically able to seek, sustain, and succeed in local elected office.¹⁴ The cumulative pressures associated with serving in local government may disproportionately discourage a wider range of candidates from seeking office, particularly younger individuals, working parents, caregivers, and those without independent financial means or flexible employment arrangements. For some participants, this raised broader concerns about diversity, representation, and the long-term health of local democracy.

“What we’ve seen leading up to this point is that municipal councils are made up of old, retired white guys doing it for fun. I don’t mean any ill intent, but we have been seeing that. By keeping the pay so low, you won’t attract really strong community leaders who have to give up a salary to do this work.”

SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS

A frequent theme throughout the interviews was whether elected officials are adequately resourced to perform the role effectively and sustainably.

While staff provide some critical support, many also felt that additional supports are needed, even if they struggled to define precisely what form those supports should take or felt uneasy advocating for them publicly.

An indispensable resource: For many elected officials, especially those new to the role, staff are among the most important and reliable sources of institutional knowledge and technical expertise available to Council.

“I can go talk to the Director of Finance and say ‘What do you think about this?’ or go to Director of Infrastructure and say, ‘How do we take care of this?’”

The guiding role of the CAO emerged repeatedly, particularly in conversations with mayors. Many described the mayor–CAO relationship as essential to effective local governance and to navigating the complexities of the role itself.

“When you do the training, they say your CAO and mayor need to have a hand-in-glove relationship, and I really realized this when I became mayor.”

¹⁴ Recent research conducted by the AMO through its Healthy Democracy Project reinforces this finding. Across surveyed candidates, financial barriers, including council compensation, were the most frequently cited obstacles to running for office. AMO, [“Mapping the Experiences of Diverse Candidates Running for Municipal Office in Ontario,”](#) August 2024, p. 36.

The CAO can serve as a coach for members of council, helping them better understand their roles and the broader duties associated with municipal leadership, including how to take a longer-term and more strategic view of the municipality, and not get bogged down in the day-to-day.

“I really trust my CAO and respect her. She was able to guide me and say, ‘You really need to look at and understand your 10-year financial plan.’”

At the same time, a few participants acknowledged that where institutional trust breaks down between council and staff, the effectiveness of these relationships can become strained, a topic explored in greater detail in Section 5.

Uneven direct support structures: In general, the level of direct administrative and institutional support available to public officeholders varies dramatically across municipalities.

“The problem is every municipality is a different size and different resources.”

In many smaller municipalities, members of council operate with little or no dedicated support staff, often relying on shared administrative resources – administrative or executive assistants – with CAOs or other senior leaders.

“I don’t have any supports...I can handle my own administration. I know in other small communities the mayor has a dedicated administrative person but we don’t have the budget to allow for that.”

By contrast, in larger, urban municipalities, elected officials are often supported by dedicated constituency, communications, and policy staff who assist with everything from scheduling to meeting preparation and addressing constituent inquiries. Meanwhile, interviewees from many mid-sized and rapidly growing municipalities described ongoing discussions about whether existing support structures for elected officials should evolve, given the increasing complexity and demands of the role.



Compensation and structural reform: There are no province-wide standards for council size, compensation, or expectations regarding the time commitment associated with elected office. While diversity across the municipal sector is to be expected, the lack of common reference points can make conversations about reform more challenging and leave municipalities to grapple with these questions largely on their own.

“There are cities the same size as ours that make twice my salary...Every city is different in terms of their budget’s ability to pay.”

“

“We just went through [a review] and the next council will be full-time with a substantial pay increase. We engaged an arm’s length panel and there were real experts...that came to their conclusions.”

Collectively, there is ambivalence and wariness about what reform could or should look like. As we noted, many are cognizant that limited compensation creates barriers to participation and places strain on elected officials, yet they were equally conscious of taxpayer expectations and wider municipal financial constraints.

For many communities, changes to how things work – whether adding staff, increasing salaries, or adjusting the size or structure of council – can be deeply political and contentious, sometimes even among members of council themselves.

“We had a consultant several years ago say that we should move to fewer councillors but make them full-time, but it was turned down by council.”

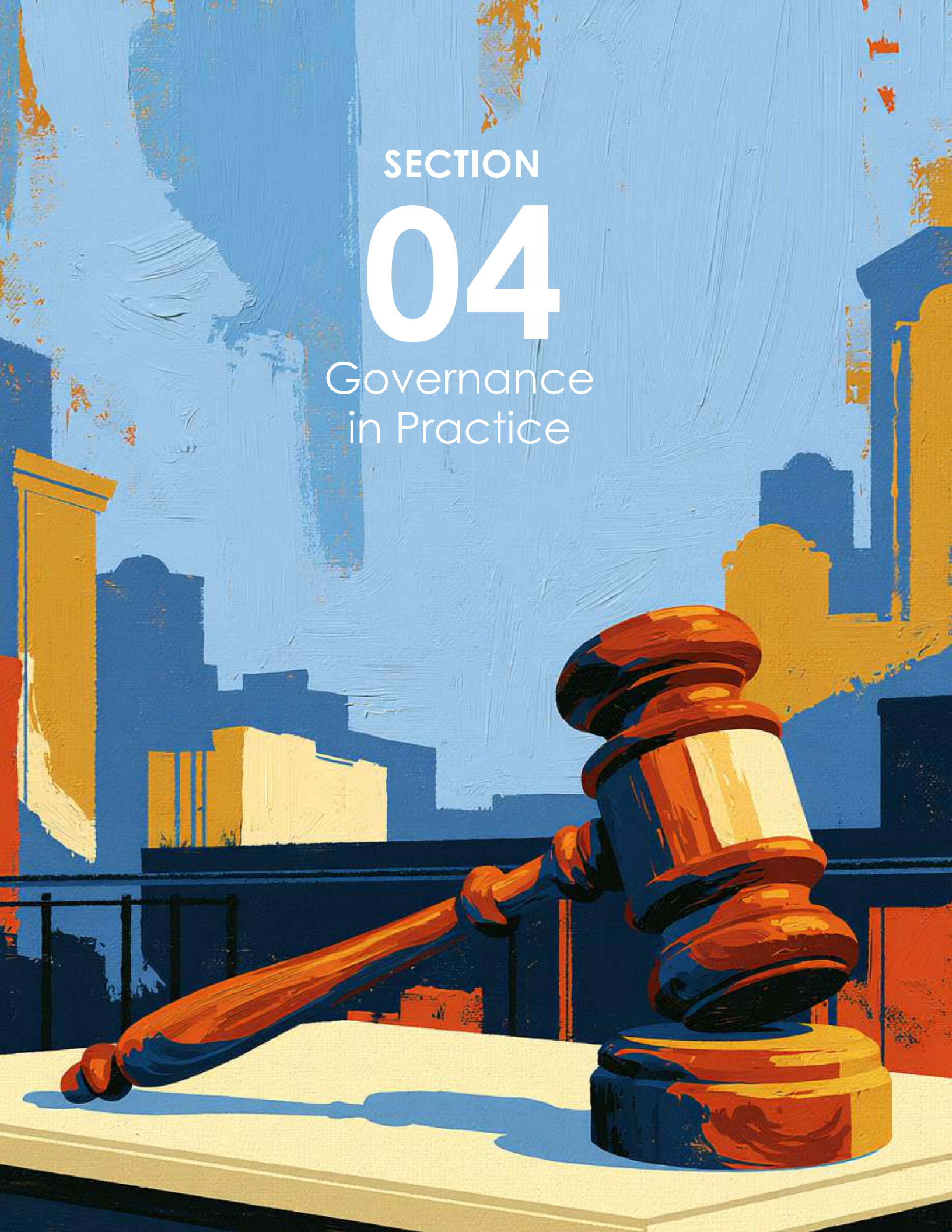
No definitive amount of compensation, staffing, or institutional support alone can guarantee success in elected office. Additional support can help, to be sure. But effective local governance depends on much more than formal structures or material supports. Achieving policy goals, building consensus, navigating conflict, and moving municipal priorities forward often hinge on relationships, trust, communication and political skill. It is to these less tangible – but no less critical – dimensions of local governance that we now turn.



SECTION

04

Governance
in Practice



Introduction

Most people run for office because they want to make a difference in their communities. Yet once elected, many quickly discover that how to govern – and do so effectively – is not always self-evident.

Municipal government requires elected officials to work within institutional realities that can sometimes feel slow, complex, or constraining. Council decisions are collective by nature, meaning that progress depends on building support and working through established processes. Achieving meaningful outcomes requires elected officials to work within these realities rather than around them. It also requires an appreciation that governance is about more than advancing individual priorities; it is about maintaining confidence in the institutions and processes through which decisions are made.

As communities prepare to elect new councils, it is worth asking not only who should represent us, but how they should conduct the public's business once they take office. The reflections that follow offer insight into the norms, processes, and leadership practices that help councils govern successfully while strengthening trust in local government.

GOVERNANCE IS A TEAM SPORT

Municipal government operates very differently from the partisan systems that most residents associate with politics.

When people think about political leadership, they often picture Question Period in Parliament or a provincial legislature: government and opposition benches facing one another across the chamber and elected representatives publicly challenging one another in highly performative settings. Local government, however, is different by design.

“As an individual councillor, you are powerless. You are part of the council.”

At the municipal level, there is no governing party, no formal opposition, and no cabinet-room decision-making. Instead, municipal councils have been designed to ensure inclusive leadership with collective governance responsibilities and decision-making conducted largely in the open.

Notwithstanding the emergence of strong mayor powers – discussed later in this section – authority in municipal government rests with council as a whole, not with a single individual or political party. This critical distinction is reflected even in the physical design of council chambers themselves. Unlike the opposing benches of Westminster-style legislatures, municipal councils commonly sit in horseshoe or circular arrangements intended to facilitate discussion and collective deliberation.

“[People] don’t get that they are one vote. ‘I’m going to change such and such.’ No, you’re not. Not without Council on board.”

Many elected officials first enter office believing that strong leadership means driving change independently or “getting things done” through individual determination or force of will. In practice, what we heard from councillors and mayors alike – including those with strong mayor powers – is that there is no real path forward without council. Getting things done requires elected officials to find ways of working together and to develop the relationships, processes, and tools necessary to build support around a common agenda.

COUNCIL CULTURE MATTERS

Municipal government is built around ongoing human relationships. Interviewees emphasized that the foundational culture of council as a governing body – including its level of trust, professionalism, respect, and collegiality – can significantly shape how effectively a municipality governs.

We must agree to the basics: Participants emphasized the need for a shared understanding of how members of council engage with one another, conduct debate, and approach their responsibilities. While formal tools such as Codes of Conduct establish expectations, a strong and cooperative culture of governance ultimately depends on whether members internalize those norms in practice. Chief among these standards is respect.

“One important dynamic is collegiality. Are you making the front page of the paper dumping on someone or name calling or engaging partisan politics, which creates considerable harsh feelings?”

As we heard earlier, elected officials expect criticism from residents and members of the public. But equally challenging is when the disrespect and attacks come from fellow members of council. Governing can be difficult enough without viewing colleagues as adversaries.

“My expectation for council was that this is the best of the best...Shows my naïveté.”

Some participants noted that unlike most workplaces, local public officeholders do not have access to traditional human resources processes, leaving Integrity Commissioners as one of the few formal mechanisms available to address interpersonal disputes or misconduct. However, these processes can be costly, limited in scope, and not always well suited to resolving ongoing relational tensions within governing bodies.



“HR doesn’t apply for us.
All we have is the Integrity
Commissioner.”

At the time of report writing, the Municipal Accountability Act, 2026 received Royal Assent. Once in force, it will introduce a provincially regulated code of conduct for Ontario municipalities, expand the oversight role of the Integrity Commissioner of Ontario, and establish new enforcement mechanisms, including the ability to remove elected officials from office in prescribed circumstances.¹⁵ Details, including the timing of the new provisions are still forthcoming and it is too early to assess their impact on municipal governance.

Meet people as people: We heard repeatedly about the importance of investing time outside formal meetings to get to know colleagues and build relationships.

“It was a lot of effort to reach out as mayor to each councillor to have the coffees and lunches and understand where they were coming from.”

¹⁵ Municipal Accountability Act, 2026.

Relationship-building was consistently described not as a political tactic, but as a necessary part of governing in an environment where elected officials must continue working together over a four-year term – and often much longer – despite difficult votes, disagreements, and sometimes clashing priorities. Interviewees also stressed that these relationships require ongoing maintenance and attention throughout the term of office, not just at the outset.

“I meet with each [member of council] as much as our schedules allow...this is a set time to discuss whatever is on their minds.”

DISAGREEMENT WITHOUT DYSFUNCTION

Debate on council is inevitable – and advisable, as long it does not adversely impact the work of government.

Political scientists argue that debate is a cornerstone of healthy governance, serving as a structured and public process to test assumptions, examine evidence, improve decision-making efficacy, and enhance public trust.¹⁶

“The most harmonious councils are the ones where I can tell the mover or seconder, ‘I can’t support this, I don’t believe in it.’ They’re cool with it and we can go for a beer.”

Don’t take it personally: Participants emphasized the importance of separating policy disagreements from personal feelings. Doing so helps maintain productive working relationships among members of council while also fostering personal resilience and a healthy separation between the individual and the role.

“Don’t take that conflict away from the council table. You must carry on as colleagues outside of that and don’t hold animosity and you can’t carry conflict with you.”

Accept the decision, and move on: Spirited debate might be welcome, but there must be respect for the final decision of council, even if individual members disagree with the outcome. Many codes of conduct include provisions requiring members to accurately communicate council decisions and respect the process through which they were reached, regardless of their personal position on the matter.¹⁷ Participants warned against holding grudges, engaging in retaliation, or allowing unresolved disputes to linger after votes are concluded.

“My motto is you fight like hell for your position and then you go on to the next one.”

Stay unified in the face of the public: Respect for council’s decision-making process must also extend beyond town hall and into public communications, including online. As discussed earlier, social media has become a fertile environment for incivility and toxic exchanges, and research suggests that politicians are part of this dynamic as well.¹⁸

“Once a bylaw or resolution goes forward, going out into the public and saying ‘I didn’t vote for that’ is totally wrong. You have to support [decisions] publicly, otherwise it creates friction.”

“I have worked really hard to make sure we present a united front to the public and to keep any arguments or anything behind closed doors.”

¹⁶ Karen Bird, [“Talk Matters: How Municipal Council Debates Can Enhance Democracy,”](#) *The Conversation*, March 19, 2026.

¹⁷ For example, s.4.1(h) of the Township of Lincoln’s [Code of Conduct for Members of Council and Local Boards](#) states that Members shall “accurately communicate the decisions of council and respect council’s decision-making process even if they disagree with council’s ultimate determinations and rulings.” Most other codes include similar provisions, though exact wording can be somewhat variable. Note that the *Municipal Accountability Act, 2026* which received Royal Assent in June 2026, provides for a standardized municipal code of conduct, though implementation details are still forthcoming.

¹⁸ Bird, “Talk Matters”; Yu-Ru Lin, [“Some Politicians Who Share Harmful Information Are Rewarded with More Clicks, Study Finds,”](#) April 22, 2025.

When councils publicly fracture, openly bad-mouth one another, or malign their own decisions, there is more at stake than interpersonal conflict. Participants raised concerns about consequences such as the erosion of public confidence in local government, damage to the municipality's reputation, and downstream impacts on employee recruitment and retention, economic development, investment attraction, and external partnerships. Put simply, council risks undermining the institution and community it exists to serve.



“In the past, our council has been very divided, and I think it makes you look foolish and I don’t think it’s good for attracting investment, so I took the strategy of keeping our dirty laundry behind closed doors.”

The risk is not only reputational. In a highly visible public environment, how members of council treat one another can influence public expectations around political discourse and acceptable behaviour.

“I have not been a target of horrific social media things or inappropriate challenges in public. I attribute that also to the good behaviour of the council...we’re not sniping at each other or doing bad work. Because what happens is the community goes, “If that’s how you’re treating each other, then it’s okay for me to do it too.”

In the current moment, the quality of local democratic discourse may matter as much as the policies and decisions it produces. The role of elected officials in leading by example is more critical than ever.

INFLUENCE OVER AUTHORITY

Interpersonal dynamics shape whether councils get along...and also how decisions are made, and how priorities move forward.

The elected officials we interviewed frequently returned to the importance of persuasion and “soft power” as core components of effective governance. They observed that aggressive or performative stances can be counterproductive and potentially sour the overall dynamic on council or individual relationships between members.

“More with honey than with vinegar...strong-arming doesn’t win friends right? It creates lasting enemies.”

A slow, intentional game: Persuasion is a long-term process rather than a single debate or vote. It also requires a good understanding of council and the goals of members, which is why the relationship-building discussed above is critical.

“Part of it is getting to know my colleagues and knowing what their priorities are and where they’ll go and where they won’t go.”

Rather than trying to push through change quickly, officials described the importance of moving conversations forward gradually, bringing others along with you, and recognizing when the political and organizational conditions are right to advance an issue.

“You do the policy work and be ready to go and then you sit there and you wait until the right time comes.”

One councillor reflected on revisiting a difficult waste management issue over several years, recognizing that colleagues were not initially prepared to support aspects of the proposal. Rather than bring forward the exact same recommendation after council opposition, they sought opportunities to reintroduce the underlying policy objective through different means, leveraging shifting priorities and supporting evidence. In this case, a conversation that had previously centred on waste collection later resurfaced through discussions around climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, creating a different context for colleagues to reconsider elements of the issue. As the councillor explained:

“In terms of getting things done, I found another avenue to reiterate what I said last year, and the staff person did a great job explaining [things]...I could see the lightbulbs turn on.”

This approach – knowing when to push, when to pull back, and when to revisit an issue – is an important part of exercising strategic influence. Effective leadership sometimes involves gradually shifting what council colleagues and the public view as possible, reasonable, or politically feasible over time, a concept political theorists often describe as moving the “Overton window.”

“Moving the agenda forward, you need to know where to put your efforts in and work forward.”

“I don’t want to put it in front of council until we have the majority of votes. I don’t try until it’s going to work. It takes time to move the Overton window to get to the point where you do the thing.”

Persuasion is a two-way street: Influence works both ways. Elected officials are expected not only to persuade others, but also to remain open to adjusting their own views. Committee meetings and public depositions were identified as valuable democratic tools because they create opportunities for members of council to hear different perspectives and evidence and reconsider previously held positions.

“There was an initiative and I said this is a bad idea...but then I did eight hours of delegations that moved me and I changed my mind.”

Responsible leadership often requires a healthy dose of humility – an acceptance that no one arrives around the horseshoe with all the answers and a willingness to change course, when needed, and own those decisions publicly.

“You have to have open-minded people. You have to have people that are willing to change their mind if the data tells them to.”





“If you understand how municipal government works,
you can change stuff and get it done.”

PROCEDURE IS POWER

Municipal governance is profoundly shaped by rules, procedures, and institutional processes.

Interviewees emphasized that procedure is not merely administrative detail; it is how ideas and decisions move through the system and how council gets its work done.

Procedure also serves an important democratic function. While residents may not always agree with a decision, they are more likely to accept it when they have confidence in the process that produced it. In this sense, policies, procedures, and governance rules help safeguard the legitimacy of local government.

Want to be effective? Learn – and follow – the rules and requirements: It is critical to not only review but also understand the frameworks that govern and inform municipal decision-making, including the Municipal Act, 2001 and other provincial legislation, the municipality’s procedure by-law, code of conduct, budget, Official Plan, and strategic plan (if one exists), among others.

“I always tell officials to go to the procedure by-law and read it. It will literally tell you what you can and cannot do.”

Together, these tools define the roles and responsibilities of the mayor, council, and staff, establish the policy direction that guides municipal activities, clarify the limits of municipal authority, and explain how decisions move through the

institution. While many of these topics are introduced during onboarding and training sessions, there is no substitute for spending time with the material itself and seeking the practical expertise of municipal staff, particularly the Clerk and CAO.

“All councils should use their by-laws. It will elevate everyone’s game.”

We heard that some of the most frustrating experiences on council occur not due to disagreement, but because elected officials fail to adhere to their own rules, processes, or meeting practices.

“The number of times I have heard about issues across Ontario municipalities, and the real problem is they went off the procedural rails. If they had just stayed within the procedural by-law and the scope, [the situation] would probably be better than it was otherwise.”

The bottom line is that the effectiveness of a council can be limited by the procedural, policy, and governance gaps of its own members. Good governance necessitates more than knowing the rules and requirements; it depends on consistently applying them in practice.

“We have all been to council meetings where people don’t read their packages... and it really is a barrier to good governance.”

“Some Councillors seven years later say, ‘I don’t know how to make motions!’”

Tools to empower, not constrain: Several interviewees noted that council procedure and Robert's Rules of Order often get a "bad rap," particularly among newly elected officials who can sometimes perceive procedural requirements as restrictive or overly bureaucratic. Eventually, however, many come to see procedure in a different light – not as a barrier, but as one of the primary mechanisms through which governance actually happens.

"We perceive procedure frequently as limiting us, but it's actually quite empowering if you follow it. If you generally don't follow it, then it feels restricting."

Procedural knowledge itself can become a form of influence. Those who understand how motions, referrals, amendments, deferrals, reconsiderations, committee mandates, and agenda processes operate are often better positioned to advance priorities at the right moment – and with the right tool.

Importantly, these mechanisms are available to every member of council, helping to promote fairness, transparency, and accountability within a collaborative decision-making structure.

"Knowing procedure by-law and the rules of the game...was an important lesson I learned. It has made me a much stronger councillor, knowing when to defer, refer, table."

Procedure can also help depersonalize disagreements or conflict. One mayor reflecting on a difficult relationship with a fellow councillor noted that procedural discipline helped constrain disruptive behaviour and refocus discussions on the business before council. In many respects, procedure provides a neutral framework for resolving disputes by shifting attention from personalities to process. At StrategyCorp, our common refrain is simple: "Don't get mad, get procedural."

"The person who knows the rules wins."

GOVERNING BEYOND THE CRISIS OF THE DAY

Governance does not stop once debate ends and a vote is taken. Councils must then translate decisions into implementation, budgeting, planning, and long-term stewardship.

In a political environment often dominated by the issue of the day, one of the most important responsibilities of local government is maintaining a focus on the community's long-term direction.

Strategic planning, budgets, Official Plans, infrastructure investments, housing policies, and asset management decisions all require municipal councils to look beyond individual issues and election cycles toward broader community outcomes.

"For me, a lot of the policy heavy lifting was done as soon as the strategic plan was done."

The value of a strategic plan: Developing a strategic plan emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews as one of the most important ways councils can move from individual priorities to collective direction. Through the process, elected officials bring forward the commitments and issues that motivated them to seek office, then work together to translate them into a shared set of objectives for the term.

Even mayors operating under strong mayor powers continued to emphasize the importance of setting direction with council. While these authorities provide additional formal powers, discussed in the next section, most of the strong mayors we interviewed still described effective governance as rooted in a shared policy agenda rather than governing unilaterally.



“In 20 years, I want people to think ‘I’m certainly glad council did this and this’... so it’s really important we focus on that and push past the political noise.”

“I wish more councils understood the strength of actually articulating your long-term hopes, plans, campaign promises in a strategic plan, then you can give staff clear direction and get it done.”

Strategic plans were repeatedly described not as aspirational visioning exercises, but as foundational governance tools that align council, staff, budgets, departmental workplans, and organizational priorities around a shared set of priorities. They also serve as public accountability documents, communicating council’s commitments and providing a reference point against which progress can be assessed.

A well-used strategic plan helps councils evaluate competing priorities, maintain focus over the course of a term, and explain both the decisions they support and those they choose not to pursue. It serves as a critical point of reference when new challenges or issues arise, helping ensure attention is not continually diverted from previously established commitments.

“Council has to articulate where they want the community to go and then stand by it.”

“Councillors would ask why policies would be in front of them and it’s, like, well, you voted for them in the strategic plan.”

This continuity and clarity are also critical for staff. Once strategic objectives are formally adopted, they shape the policy work, reports, recommendations, and implementation activities that follow.

A strategic plan is only meaningful if council, supported by staff reporting, uses it to track progress and guide decisions throughout the term. While the planning process itself can foster a shared purpose, the real test is whether the priorities translate into sustained implementation and measurable results. Regular reporting helps embed the plan into the routine work of council and the municipality, rather than allowing it to sit on a shelf once adopted.

“You tell the staff where you want to go and we did and now get out of the way...”

Balancing the long-term vs short-term:

Interviewees also stressed that governing strategically often requires balancing immediate public demands with longer-term community needs. Some of the most important municipal decisions may not produce immediate political rewards and, in some cases, their full benefits may only become apparent many years later. Several elected officials explicitly framed local governance as a stewardship responsibility toward future generations.

“We would all like to make the easy decisions that make everyone like us, but many Councils don’t get it that it’s not about the four years, it’s about 10 years and 20 years out.”

Maintaining this perspective can be difficult. In some respects, municipal politics is inherently reactive, requiring councils to respond to operational pressures, emerging issues, public concerns, and changes imposed by other orders of government. Long-term thinking therefore requires discipline and a deliberate effort to keep broader objectives in view amid competing demands.

“No matter the best strategic plans, we have to shift away from them because of other pressures and legislative changes from other governments.”

At times, this means making decisions that serve the long-term interests of the community even when they are unpopular in the moment, whether related to housing, infrastructure investment, asset management, or taxation.

Strong leadership is not just about being responsive to today’s challenges but about positioning communities to succeed over time through clear direction and sometimes difficult choices.

“

“I remember somebody actually said that our job is to give people what they want. And I thought no, it’s to give them what they need.”



Learning Never Stops: The Importance of Training and Professional Development

“The more I can learn, the better I will be.”

Orientation, training, and ongoing learning therefore play an important role in supporting both individual elected officials and the effectiveness of council as a whole. Participants described the range of training they received – on everything from the Municipal Act, to planning frameworks, and the roles and responsibilities of council and staff – as essential to learning the ins and outs of the role.

“We need to teach incoming people the basics. We assume people always know the basics, but they don’t.”

Training is most effective when it is practical and outcomes-focused rather than purely theoretical. The goal is for members of council to internalize how governance actually works, and this is often best done through real-world examples, simulations, and interactive tools where they can engage with what they are learning.

“What would be helpful, frankly, is not a boring class on Robert’s Rules of Order but to practice them – get into a room and do it.”

Similarly, informal and experiential learning opportunities can be eye-opening for members of council. The common saying, “show, don’t tell” applies here as well. It can be one thing to take a tour of municipal facilities and yards; it’s another to meet and talk with staff.

“You should go out to the roads yard, you should go to the water treatment plant, you should go see how all this stuff actually works.”

Notably, financial literacy was identified as one of the most consistent training needs. Municipal finance differs substantially from private sector or household budgeting and often requires politicians to rethink the assumptions they bring into office.

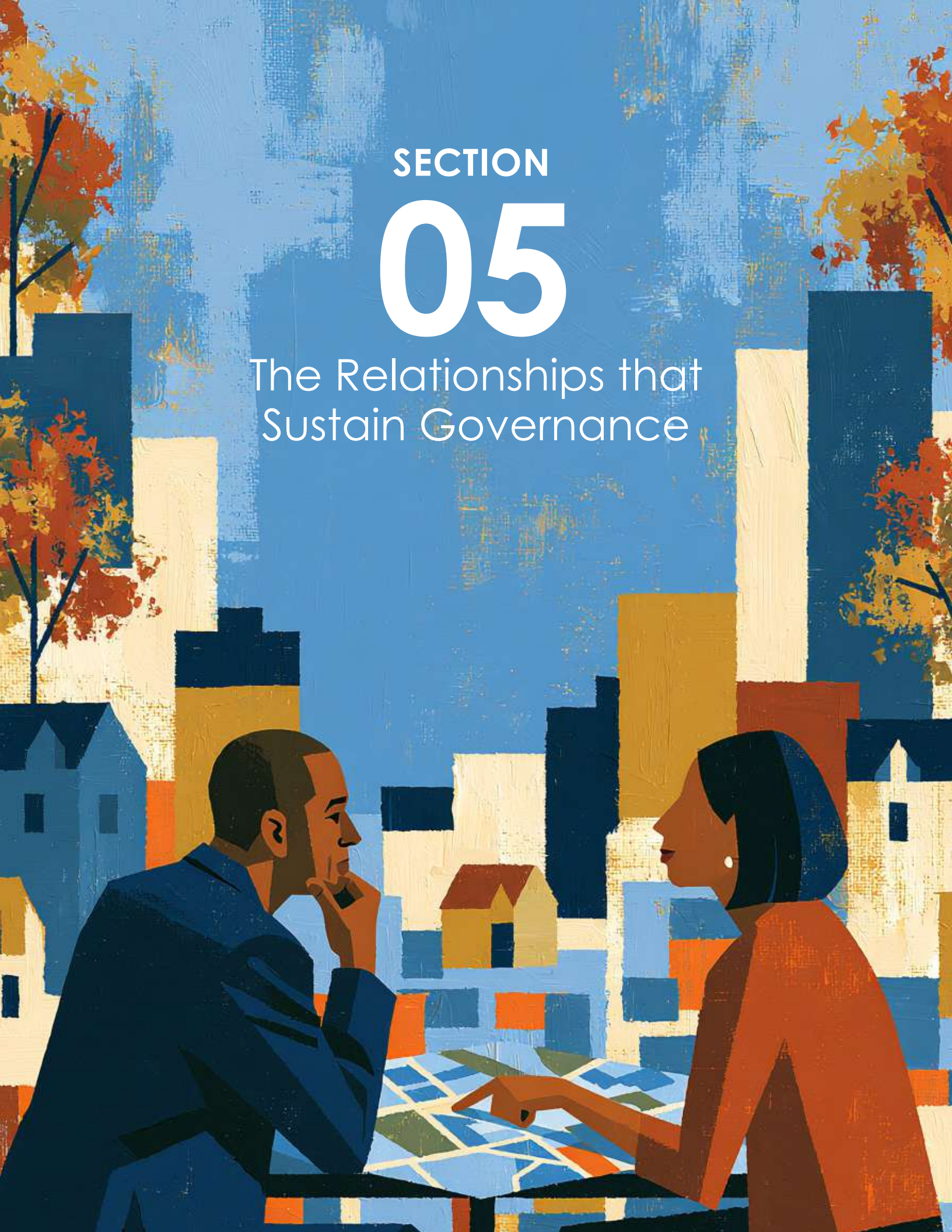
“We need financial training at the beginning of every term of council. Even for longstanding councillors.”

Learning must also be viewed as an ongoing responsibility rather than a one-time orientation exercise. Many concepts only become fully tangible once elected officials have some on-the-job experience, after the initial flood of information has begun to settle. Municipalities should therefore approach learning as a four-year process, starting with the essentials for a new council and progressing to more specialized topics, skill development, and periodic refreshers as the term unfolds.

Certainly, there is frustration that educational opportunities are not always attended by the members who would benefit from them most. Ultimately, however, training is not a luxury or an optional add-on; it is part of the role. Dedicated policies and budget lines for council learning and professional development reinforce that effective governance requires continuous investment in knowledge-building and leadership capacity.¹⁹

Local government does not require elected representatives to arrive with all the answers. But it does require curiosity, humility, time investment, and a willingness to keep learning and growing.

¹⁹ AMO, [Lead with Respect Handguides](#), p. 93.

The background is a stylized, painterly illustration of a cityscape. In the foreground, a man and a woman are shown in profile, facing each other and looking down at a map or document on a table. The man is on the left, wearing a dark blue suit, with his hand resting on his chin in a thoughtful pose. The woman is on the right, wearing an orange top, pointing at the map with her right hand. The map itself is a colorful grid of blue, green, and orange squares. Behind them, the cityscape is composed of various colored blocks representing buildings, with some trees showing autumn foliage in shades of orange and red. The sky is a deep blue with some lighter, textured areas. The overall style is modern and artistic, using a limited color palette of blues, oranges, and yellows.

SECTION 05

The Relationships that
Sustain Governance

Introduction

While legislation and procedure establish the formal framework within which municipalities operate, it is often the quality of relationships and clarity of roles that determine how effectively a municipality functions.

Municipal government depends on ongoing interactions between elected officials, staff, and the public that shape how decisions are made, implemented, and understood. When those connections are strong, councils are better able to facilitate the work of the municipality, navigate disagreement, build trust, and advance shared priorities. When they break down, even well-intentioned decisions can become more difficult to deliver and defend.

The interviews repeatedly returned to the importance of these relationships. Participants reflected on the partnership between council and staff, the unique leadership responsibilities of the mayor, and the opportunities and challenges created by strong mayor powers. Taken together, what they shared offers insight into the human dynamics that sustain local government and help translate authority into action.

THE COUNCIL-STAFF RELATIONSHIP: DIFFERENT ROLES, SHARED PURPOSE



“I count on the administration’s support whether it is directors or my EA...these people are my lifeblood for this job. They make me look good, keep me informed, and they are my sounding board.”

The relationship between elected officials and staff stands at the heart of municipal government, but it is not always easy to navigate.

As we heard earlier, learning where governance ends and administration begins is a challenge for most newly elected officeholders.

Yet knowing the distinction is only the starting point. Elected officials and staff approach the same issues through different lenses and carry different duties. The former are responsible for setting direction and making decisions; the latter are responsible for providing advice, managing operations, and implementing council’s direction. The real test is building a productive working relationship across these respective roles.

A partnership, not a hierarchy: Municipalities function best when elected officials and staff understand that they have different responsibilities but a shared purpose.

“It’s not just me as an individual, it’s the admin team and it’s the council willing to part with the dollars to make things happen. We buy into the vision collectively.”

Many participants rejected the idea that municipal governance operates through a traditional chain of command between elected officials and staff. Council provides direction through collective decisions, while staff are entrusted with advising, administering, and implementing those decisions.

“[Councillors] had a difficult time understanding that they cannot direct staff...that is very important.”

“We are a board of directors for a company. That’s the nature of council...and we should not be in the muck, so to speak.”

This dynamic aligns closely with a longstanding board governance principle often summarized as “noses in, fingers out.” Elected officials should remain engaged in the municipality’s performance, priorities, and results, while resisting the temptation to become involved in operations. Council’s role is not to run the municipality, but to ensure it is being run effectively.

The accountability challenge: The “noses in, fingers out” principle is helpful, but it does not eliminate a central tension in municipal governance. As discussed in Section 2, elected officials face significant and increasingly vitriolic public pressure while possessing relatively limited authority over the day-to-day machinery of government.

Residents contact their mayor or councillor when a garbage pickup is missed, a permit is delayed, or a municipal service falls short of expectations, for example. Yet elected officials do not directly manage staff, other than the CAO as council’s sole employee, nor do they implement solutions to these issues themselves. They must answer for outcomes while relying on others to deliver them.

“There’s one accountability function – it’s me and council.”

The challenge is compounded by the fact that residents rarely have sightlines into the internal processes, staffing constraints, legislative requirements, budget limitations, and competing priorities that shape municipal decisions and service delivery. Elected officials therefore occupy a difficult position. They are expected to explain, defend, and sometimes apologize for the decisions of council while relying on a complex organization and a host of other actors to carry them out. When progress is slow, frustration can emerge on all sides, even when everyone is working toward the same goal.

“Staff speak in a language that most people don’t understand.”

Staff often approach issues through a technical, operational, or risk-management lens. Meanwhile, elected officials hear directly from residents looking for answers and action. Misunderstandings can arise when those differing perspectives are not recognized or when dissatisfaction with outcomes becomes directed toward the people responsible for delivering them.

“It’s easy to paint yourself as a populist fighting for the constituent against the big bad corporation.”

“Too many councillors overstep or are dismissive and disrespectful to staff.”

Certainly, these tensions were not universal nor necessarily evidence of dysfunction. In many respects they are a natural consequence of how municipal government works and reflect the differences in council-staff roles and accountabilities. While they may not be possible to eliminate entirely, interviewees suggested that they can be managed constructively through open communication, transparent information-sharing, and mutual respect.

Closing the Accountability Gap

How can municipalities address one of council's greatest challenges: accountability without authority? One answer is to ensure elected officials have the information, tools, and support they need to be successful and, in turn, confidently communicate out the direction of the municipality. In many respects, members of council serve as the municipality's greatest ambassadors.

In an environment of heightened scrutiny and growing public expectations, strategic planning, long-range financial planning, performance measurement and reporting, and effective communications are more important than ever. Municipalities with a clear roadmap and vision for the future and transparent ways of demonstrating results are often better positioned to build trust, respond to criticism with data, and find their way through the inevitable “gotcha” moments of the modern public sector.

These are not new tools, as noted in the previous section. Traditionally viewed as management tools that support effective municipal administration,

they increasingly serve an important governance function as well. They provide an important safeguard for elected officials by ensuring they have the information needed to explain decisions, correct misinformation, demonstrate tangible progress on the issues that matter most to residents, and identify where course corrections may be required.

When visibility into progress is limited or they perceive an information vacuum, elected officials may seek additional assurance that council's priorities are moving forward, sometimes resulting in greater involvement in operational matters than intended.

By proactively equipping elected officials with long-range tools to understand where the organization is headed, how it is performing, and where challenges remain, municipalities can strengthen confidence in the administration, reinforce trust and collaboration between council and staff, and mitigate the pressures that can otherwise strain the relationship.



Respect is foundational: Effective council-staff relationships are not defined by the absence of disagreement, but by the presence of mutual respect. Participants observed that while staff are responsible for providing advice and executing council's direction, they should not become political targets. Public officeholders can ask challenging questions, be critical of a policy recommendation, and scrutinize a municipality's scorecard without personalizing disagreements or assigning blame.

"We are respectful and ask good questions and don't try to throw staff under the bus either."

Professionalism during disagreement is as important to the council-staff relationship as it is to council's own dynamics. Similar to the advice offered to council, interviewees emphasized the value of raising concerns directly with staff before council meetings, rather than through surprise attacks during public debate. Members of council also have a responsibility to ensure public discourse remains respectful and does not become personal, harassing, or targeted toward staff.

"[Staff] try to do non-political reports and provide their best advice and then they get attacked and I try my best to protect them during the public process."

The old adage about treating people as you would like to be treated still applies. Beyond being the right thing to do, it has practical value. People are generally more willing to work through challenges and engage in productive problem-solving when interactions are grounded in mutual respect.

"I have a positive relationship with staff as well which is helpful...if you treat people with respect they will get back to you faster."

Communication is an important part of building that trust. Several interviewees highlighted the value of regular dialogue between elected officials and administration outside formal council and committee meetings. Some municipalities have established recurring meetings between individual members of council, the CAO, and senior staff, as relevant, to discuss emerging issues, upcoming staff reports, and potential concerns before they become larger challenges with potentially damaging consequences for the council administration relationship.



"I have found that [these meetings] are really helpful because we can have frank conversations and ask questions and help people understand different issues and understand where people are coming from."

Respect for the people who operate municipal government helps reinforce respect for municipal government itself, an important consideration at a time when trust in our local democratic institutions is under threat.

As discussed in the previous section, governance is a team sport. The same principle applies to the relationship between council and staff. Different roles need not mean different goals. Elected officials and staff are most successful when they can challenge one another constructively while remaining united by a shared commitment to serving the community.

We now turn to the role of the mayor, as head of council, in helping to establish and maintain that culture.

THE MULTI-FACETED ROLE OF THE MAYOR

The *Municipal Act, 2001* assigns the mayor a unique position within municipal government.

In addition to serving as the municipality's chief executive officer, the mayor is responsible for presiding over council meetings, providing leadership to council, and carrying out a range of statutory duties.²⁰ While these responsibilities establish the broad contours of the role, they leave considerable room for interpretation.

The mayors we interviewed consistently described a position characterized by increased visibility and accountability, both within the municipality and in the eyes of the public.

“Direct accountability is great, but it also means you’re exposed.”

“Anything good or bad that happens in the City is either your credit or your fault and you have to accept it.”

This reality shapes how many mayors understand and execute their role, extending far beyond casting votes or chairing meetings. Our interviews offer valuable insight into what it means to provide leadership to council in practice.

The mayor as unifier and consensus-builder:

One of the mayor's primary responsibilities is helping council function as a team. The mayor is expected to steward the council relationship and keep members focused on governing and decision-making, even amid the inevitable disagreements.

“As the mayor, you are the head of council and you are supposed to bring people together.”

This often involves helping council find common ground and move from individual positions to collective decisions, whether during budget deliberations, strategic planning discussions, or periods of interpersonal tension.

“It’s delicate but as a mayor or warden it is your job to coach your council.”

The mayor as strategic leader: While every member contributes to setting priorities, mayors often serve as the individuals most responsible for keeping them front and centre. To be sure, this can require a shift in perspective, particularly for those mayors moving into the role from a councillor position.

“I needed a much larger vision as mayor and start thinking on a grander scale.”

In this sense, the mayor often serves as a bridge between council's immediate decisions and the municipality's longer-term aspirations, providing continuity and direction when competing priorities threaten to pull council off course.

The mayor as representative and spokesperson:

The *Municipal Act, 2001* identifies representing the municipality as one of the mayor's core responsibilities. Serving as the public face of council, the mayor is often called upon to communicate council decisions and serve as a visible point of leadership during contentious issues or periods of public concern.

Residents often look to the mayor not only for information, but also for reassurance that the municipality is functioning effectively and that decisions are being made through legitimate democratic processes.

“You are the spokesperson for council whether you agreed with a decision or not.”

²⁰ *Municipal Act, 2001*, s.225.

Heads of council are also frequently called upon to advocate for their communities beyond municipal boundaries. Whether engaging with provincial and federal governments, promoting economic development opportunities, or responding to local emergencies, the mayor typically serves as the municipality's principal advocate and public representative during both moments of calm and crisis.

The mayor sets the tone: Undoubtedly, the mayor plays an important role in shaping organizational culture. Through their conduct, relationships, and interactions with others, mayors influence how council functions, how staff experience the workplace, and how the municipality is perceived externally.

“You set the tone of the organization.”

People take their cues from the mayor. How they choose to comport themselves establishes expectations for others. As head of council, the mayor should not be a passive observer of misconduct or unprofessional behaviour.

“If people think it’s a gong show people will think twice before coming to work for your municipality and you have all of that sitting on your shoulders as mayor.”

Mayors are best positioned to reinforce standards of conduct, including modelling the behaviour expected under the code of conduct, using procedural tools to ensure meetings remain efficient, respectful, and productive, and intervening when behaviour – whether council, staff, or public – begins to undermine the institution. These tools exist for a reason, and effective mayors understand when and how to leverage them.

SERVING AS MAYOR IN A STRONG MAYOR WORLD

It is impossible to discuss the role of the mayor in Ontario today without considering the impact of strong mayor powers.

First introduced in Toronto and Ottawa in the *Strong Mayors, Building Homes Act, 2022* and later expanded under the *Better Municipal Governance Act, 2022*²¹; as of May 1, 2025, strong mayor powers granting heads of council enhanced political and administrative authorities applied to 216 municipalities. Intended as a tool to help municipalities accelerate housing development, the powers include the ability to propose municipal budgets, appoint and dismiss certain senior officials, reorganize administrative structures, and advance matters tied to prescribed provincial priorities.

Few municipal governance reforms in recent years have generated as much discussion or debate. In StrategyCorp’s Annual CAO Survey, strong mayor powers have emerged as a recurring concern, particularly in relation to the future of the municipal public service and the ability of staff to continue serving as professional and objective advisors.

Questions have also been raised about whether the powers have delivered on their stated intention. Recent research by the Toronto Star found that only 2 per cent of strong mayor decisions related to housing, while the majority addressed organizational matters such as staffing and administrative changes.

But what do elected officials themselves think? We asked, and the answer was complicated. We heard a range of views, from strong opposition to cautious support. Across those differences, however, a more nuanced picture emerged than is often reflected in public debate.

²¹ Bill 3, *Strong Mayors, Building Homes Act, 2022*; Bill 39, *Better Municipal Governance Act, 2022*.



“The conversations on what I can actually do has gotten way harder and people think I’m just dodging my responsibilities.”

More accountability, but not unlimited authority:

One unintended consequence of strong mayor powers may be that they have made an already misunderstood role even harder to explain. The name itself, combined with extensive media attention, appears to have reinforced the perception that mayors possess far greater authority than they actually do.

“People think I have the power to do everything now and people don’t know what [strong mayor powers] means. They say, ‘can you stop this development now and overrule the tribunal?’ They think I have now inherited all of these additional powers.”

Some interviewees highlighted that the legislation has widened the gap between what residents believe a mayor can do and what remains within their actual control, making it more difficult to explain the limits of municipal authority.

“The powers are somewhat limited in a sense. They’re not all-encompassing. There’s been a lot of hyperbole about it.”

At the same time, there was also a perspective that if mayors are to be held accountable for outcomes, they should perhaps be given

additional tools to advance priorities and address challenges. While not all supported the full suite of strong mayor powers, several saw merit in the principle that authority should be better aligned with the accountability already placed on the office.

“On social media they’ll say it’s undemocratic. But like, tell Doug Ford that, not the mayors, right? If someone gives you a tool, I would say it’s irresponsible not to use the tool.”

But even in this view, there was recognition that strong mayor powers have not transformed mayors into chief executives capable of unilaterally directing municipal affairs. In some respects, a paradoxical situation has emerged. While the powers may have created clearer lines of responsibility in certain areas, they can also concentrate public scrutiny on a single officeholder. Decisions that might previously have been understood as collective council decisions can become increasingly associated with the mayor, regardless of how many elected officials participated in shaping or supporting them.

“[With strong mayor powers, councillors] can ‘blame’ me for the budget and they embrace that actually because they don’t have to take accountability for it.”

²² AMCTO, [Strong Mayors Authorities Scan: How Mayors Are Using Their Powers](#), 2nd Edition, July 16, 2026; Kate Allen, David Rider, and Nathan Pilla, “[How Doug Ford’s Strong-Mayor Powers Have Been Used to Hire and Fire Staff: ‘A Gross Abuse of Power.’](#)” *Toronto Star*, June 2, 2026; StrategyCorp Institute, [2025 Ontario Municipal Chief Administrative Officer Survey](#), p. 46-51.

²³ Allen, Rider, and Pilla, “[How Doug Ford’s Strong-Mayor Powers Have Been Used to Hire and Fire Staff.](#)”

A tool for priorities, not a replacement for council: Among those who support or who have mobilized the powers, they are generally viewed as a governance tool rather than a substitute for council decision-making. Several mayors who had used the powers described doing so in targeted ways, and a few acknowledged that their perspective on the legislation had evolved over time.

“I have used it for the budget, housing, to speed up reports to council, and all those things ended up being positive.”

“I said I wouldn’t use them. But then the housing crisis hit and cities were given targets to meet. And I changed my mind and said I’m going to use these powers because I want to accelerate housing as fast as I can.”

Some also argued that strong mayor powers can help municipalities follow through on decisions council has already endorsed. Strategic plans and other council-approved directions can be difficult to maintain amid hyperlocal concerns or moments of political pressure. In this view, the powers can help keep decision-making oriented toward the municipality as a whole rather than allowing council to drift into a collection of ward-by-ward interests.

“I can see the downside with strong mayors, but I can also see the good because I know that some of my colleagues are very ward-centric and only think about their ward. But the mayor can come in and say, ‘no, [this decision is] in the greater good.’”

The importance of restraint: We heard that the strong mayor authorities are most effective when used selectively and strategically. Even supporters tended to take a pragmatic rather than ideological view, describing them as useful in certain circumstances but inappropriate as a routine approach to governance.

“I think [strong mayors] are beneficial, but they’re also a fine instrument, not a blunt object. A scalpel as opposed to a hammer.”

“It is helpful, but you have to use it responsibly.”

Among participants, there was little appetite for frequent or aggressive use of the powers. Most regard them as a mechanism for addressing specific challenges, responding to exceptional circumstances, or, in some cases, a tool of last resort when council decision-making goes off course, rather than an entirely new model of municipal government. A few reflected on the circumstances that might prompt them to use the powers.

“But when there’s a bad decision made, that’s when the powers come in...there have been two or three times in retrospect when I should have used them but I didn’t.”

“It would have to be something that I think council did that was really wrong and they did it not for the right reasons... if I felt it was for political reasons and boosting themselves.”

Democracy, representation, and council

dynamics: Our conversations revealed a fundamental tension at the heart of the strong mayor debate. Many of the benefits identified by supporters stem from concentrating more authority in a single office. For critics, however, that same concentration raises concerns about democratic representation, council’s collective role, and the potential for future misuse.

“I believe in democracy, and I told them right from the beginning I don’t believe these decisions are mine to be made.”

Several elected officials reflected on how the powers are changing the dynamics around the council table, creating in some cases a hierarchical relationship between the mayor and other members of council. The mayor's position now appears to carry greater weight in certain instances.

“When I ran for office, I thought that me and the mayor were both one of [so many] council members, but strong mayor powers really skewed that.”

For many, the concern was less about current officeholders than the precedent established for future councils.



“My concern is that a future mayor could really screw us.”

Drawing the line at the administration: While views differed on whether strong mayor powers are justified, there was far greater agreement when the conversation turned to the impacts on the public service. Several mayors who support aspects of the legislation expressed opposition to the provisions relating to staffing decisions, recognizing the risks such powers could pose to the traditional relationship between elected officials and administration.

“I feel really strongly that the administration should have an unbiased opinion...I would never interfere on the administration side.”

Underlying these comments is a longstanding principle of municipal governance: elected officials set direction, while staff provide objective advice and implement council's decisions, a distinction we have returned to frequently over the course of this report. Strong mayor powers can blur those lines, particularly if staff begin to wonder whether candid advice could affect their relationship with the mayor or even their employment.

“The staff don't need to be sitting there going ‘oh god do I tell it like it is... or will she fire me?’”

For some, these concerns have already materialized.

“The problem with strong mayor powers is it has created a toxic situation with council and staff.”

Others observed that the existence of the powers alone can influence organizational culture, even when they remain unused.

“It's almost like most police forces carry a hidden holster but you can't really see the gun. I'm not saying [strong mayor powers are] that overt, but...”

Ultimately, in a discussion frequently framed around questions of power and authority, preserving the integrity and independence of the public service emerged as one of the strongest points of consensus.

Governing in a Strong Mayor Environment

“A really good mayor has strong powers without having the legislation to give it to them... they are able to work collaboratively and work things forward.”

Whether one supports or opposes the legislation, strong mayor powers are now part of Ontario’s municipal landscape. As municipalities look toward the 2026 election, a new generation of mayors and councillors will seek office in a local political environment shaped by these authorities.

Successful adaptation to this environment hinges on a couple of key elements.

First, there is a need for clarity about roles and expectations, including protocols for how and when the powers will be used, how decisions will be communicated, and how the respective responsibilities of the mayor, council, and administration will be maintained. Establishing these expectations early and embedding them into key policy and procedure documents such as the code of conduct and procedural by-law can help reduce uncertainty and prevent unnecessary conflict.

Second, strong mayor powers are sometimes invoked in response to uncertainty about whether priorities are advancing or decisions are moving forward. As noted above, administrations can help address this by providing clear reporting and performance measures, reducing the likelihood that mayors feel compelled to intervene through the use of strong mayor powers.

Finally, local government remains fundamentally relational and about people, not power. Strong mayor legislation has not eliminated the need for trust, collaboration, and “soft power” across all relationships – with members of council, staff, and the public.

“If I override council and there is a [majority] vote, then I have pissed [a majority of] people off and I need to work with them, so it has to be a pretty big thing before I’m willing to override something.”

The key lesson is that strong mayor powers have altered the toolkit available to municipal leaders, but not the qualities required to lead successfully.



Conclusion

At the beginning of this report, we explored why people decide to run for municipal office. We close with one of our final questions to interviewees:
Are you running again?

Overwhelmingly, the answer was yes. Since our interviews concluded, 75 per cent of the elected officials we spoke with have announced they are seeking re-election in October 2026.



“This is the best job I’ve ever had, no question.”

At the time of our conversations, however, many were still weighing the personal and professional commitments associated with elected office against their passion for working for their communities.

“I’m questioning whether I want to put myself through another election cycle again and open myself to harassment, particularly in this age of social media.”

“I love the work, but I’m also thinking, where can I best serve? Is this still the best place?”

For those gearing up for another campaign, their reasoning was often simple: the work is not finished. Many reflected that a four-year term is simply not long enough to realize the changes they had hoped to make or see major projects through to completion.

“Some of the key things going on in the town are calling me back...I want to make sure they happen and are cemented down.”

“I don’t think my work is done by any means.”

Those preparing to step away offered a wider range of reasons. Some described the toll public office had taken on their lives.

“I want to kayak more and get to my cottage. I have not gone into the woods next to [my house] in five or six years.”

Others framed their departure as part of public service itself, creating space for new voices and perspectives.

“As an old, balding, white hetero[sexual] guy... at some point, people like me have to get out of the way and let someone else from a different background come in and actually do it.”

“I know that I helped and left the city better... there’s some stuff I wished I stuck around for, but those are selfish things, and I need to pass the baton on.”

The decision to run again proved to be as personal as the decision to run in the first place. For some, another term meant finishing what they had started. For others, stepping aside was the right decision for themselves, their families, or their communities.

These conversations also point toward a more optimistic conclusion. The experience of local elected office is not fixed. Many of the challenges described throughout this report are shaped by the environment in which elected officials serve rather than being inevitable features of the role.

Every new council term – including the one just ahead – offers an opportunity to establish strong governance practices and set expectations for how council, administration, and the public will work together toward a shared purpose.

Members of council can commit to learning the role, recognizing that effective public service requires more than goodwill. It requires an understanding of the distinction between governance and administration together with a willingness to work constructively with colleagues and conduct the business of council professionally.

Mayors can reinforce those expectations in how they carry out their responsibilities as heads of council. Their ability to build consensus and model respectful leadership shapes the culture of council and sends an important signal to the public about the standards expected in civic participation.

Administrations can support that work by providing elected officials with clear advice, meaningful information about municipal

performance, and the context needed to explain decisions and build confidence that council's priorities are moving forward. Even in an era of strong mayor powers, effective local leadership still depends far more on how people work together than on the formal powers they possess.

At its core, this report is not about the institution of local government but about the people who choose to serve. Their experiences offer practical lessons for future candidates, current elected officials, municipal administrators, and the organizations that support them. Perhaps most importantly, they remind us that healthy local democracy cannot be taken for granted. It depends on capable and committed people continuing to put their names on the ballot – and on creating an environment where they can succeed once elected.



Epilogue: Words of Advice

We concluded each interview by asking participants what advice they would offer someone considering a run for municipal office.

Their responses reflected many of the themes explored throughout this report while also offering guidance shaped by their lived experiences. Although no two interviewees answered the question in exactly the same way, several common messages emerged.

ON DECIDING WHETHER TO RUN...

“Do it!”

“There are a million reasons not to do it, and you have to find the reasons you want to and wade through the crap to still do the good work.”

“If you’re doing it for a paycheck, don’t bother. If you are doing it because you’re passionate about moving the community forward, this is what I would recommend.”

“Don’t [run for office] unless you are really prepared to make a commitment to do this full-time.”

“If you are a woman or nonbinary person, a person of colour or Indigenous person, we need more [diverse] people in public office.”

“You have to be aware of the scrutiny and the public criticism. If you don’t have a thick skin or a belly made of steel, this might not be the job for you.”

ON CAMPAIGNING...

“If you don’t go and knock on doors, you’re not going to win...the keyboard warriors are not going to teach you much. They could be anywhere in the world, or they might not even be real!”

“Build your village, build your campaign team, and find people who believe in you.”

“When I decided to run, a friend of mine said, ‘Okay, tell me who you know in the business sector, the arts, the francophone community, politics?’ She told me to call all of them and ask for advice about what I was going to do.”

ON FINDING YOUR FOOTING IN OFFICE...

“Start with the *Municipal Act*. Start with the role of council and read it, it's very short. Read it and really try to understand what it is saying and not saying.”

“Be qualified, be prepared to get your ego under control, and be prepared to do your homework.”

ON GOVERNING...

“[Council] decisions should be made based on the merits of the well-being of the community and not the election cycle.”

“Sure, you can do big things, but you have to still remember there is a structure for lots of good reasons... go to council meetings and pay attention.”

“Be authentic and admit you don't know it all and you will be a great representative.”

ON TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF...

“You don't have an obligation to engage with abusive people.”

“Don't read Facebook comments.”

“When you start this job, you become socially drained and you want to be in a room alone, but you need to connect with friends and family who don't want anything from you and family.”



Appendix: Interview Guide

The interview guide consisted of 16 questions that were shared with participants ahead of time. Interviews were between 45 and one hour in length and were conducted virtually.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What first motivated you to run for local office?
 - a. Did you have specific objectives? If so, what were they?
2. Looking back to your first campaign, how well did you understand the role?
 - a. What did you think the job would entail?
3. Once elected, how did your expectations compare with reality?
 - a. Were you surprised by anything?
 - b. Is there anything you wish you had known before you decided to run for office?
4. What aspects of the role have you found most rewarding or fulfilling?
5. What aspects have been the most challenging?
6. Looking back to your first campaign, how well did you understand the role?
 - a. What did you think the job would entail?
7. Based on your experience, what are the hallmarks of effective governance?
 - a. Have you noticed any changes in the functioning of council over the course of the term?
8. Are there any supports, training, or resources – either when you first took office or during your term – that would have helped you feel better prepared or supported in the role?
9. Now nearing the end of the term, how would you rate the experience?
 - a. Do you feel you achieved what you set out to achieve?
10. What advice would you give someone considering running for local government?
11. Do you plan to run again in the October 2026 election?

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With over 25 years of experience, StrategyCorp's Municipal Practice has established a reputation for fairness, pragmatism, and expertise in local government. Our team is regularly called upon to support the administrative and political sides of local government through some of the most practically and politically challenging issues they face.

We have had the privilege of serving nearly every municipality in Ontario south of the French River—from the smallest to the largest—as well as municipalities in other provinces and in the United States.

What we bring to the table

- **We listen first:** As the order of government closest to the people, today's municipalities face an increasingly complex web of pressures. Through active listening and collaboration, we work with our clients to understand the factors at play and create strategies that align with a municipality's business needs and strategic priorities.
- **Solutions that work ... and reports that don't get shelved:** We develop evidence-informed, customized recommendations that reflect local realities and have the buy-in of the people responsible for executing them. From the outset, we embed implementation considerations into our process to support successful outcomes.
- **Political acuity and administrative know-how:** We've been on both sides of the political-administrative divide and understand the imperatives of both elected officials and public servants. We help our clients bridge the gap and build consensus on a path forward.
- **There's no one-size-fits-all approach to municipalities:** Local governments are diverse, and what works in one place may not work elsewhere. While we leverage best practices and insights, we focus on understanding the local operating context and broader strategic landscape to ensure our recommendations are fit for purpose.

Our approach to working with municipalities is strengthened by leaders with deep experience in the public service. We are proud to count former Chief Administrative Officers, Deputy and Assistant Deputy Ministers, Planning and Community Services Commissioners, City Solicitors, and former political advisors to Premiers, Ministers, Mayors and Councillors on our roster.

Our suite of services includes:

- » Strategic Planning
- » Organizational and Service Delivery Reviews
- » Governance, Ward Boundary, and Council Composition Reviews
- » Council and Staff Training
- » Community and Stakeholder Engagement
- » Intergovernmental Relations
- » Long-Term Financial Planning Support
- » Strategic Communications and Issues Management
- » Economic Development Strategies
- » Digital Transformation
- » Human Resources and Workforce Development Planning
- » Community Safety and Well-Being Plans
- » Corporate Performance Measurement and Reporting

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