

SIX AWESOME REASONS TO RUN FOR MUNICIPAL OFFICE

Posted October 1, 2013 by Danielle Klooster

Here are my top six awesome reasons to run for municipal office:

1. **You care deeply about your community and want to make a positive impact.**

Perhaps this sounds cheesy and a wee bit Pollyanna, but I really and truly believe that this ought to be a candidate's number one motivator. To be honest, I know far too many elected officials who run with more of a "Pinky and The Brain" plan (world domination) than consuming passion and appreciation for their community.

It ought to go without saying, but you are not elected to gain (and then maintain) personal power; you are elected to serve. Your love for your community and your commitment to do your part to improve it will see you through many tough times.

And trust me,.. there WILL be tough times.

2. **You have proven leadership experience.**

Yes, it's true that democracy is (ostensibly) structured so that any person, regardless of educational or socio-economic status, can run for office. I support this concept. But – and it's a big but – serving on municipal council is not tic tac toe. As a Member of Council you are tasked with some enormous responsibility, even in a small community. This responsibility is not to be entered into lightly.

Before you choose to run for an elected position, I suggest you serve on a community board, and do some volunteer work. Build your network and your credibility. As Henry Ford said, "You cannot build a reputation on what you're *going* to do." If you haven't served your community as a volunteer, you haven't earned the right to ask it to elect you to a paid position. Prove what kind of leader you are in advance of asking for the job.

3. **You've done your homework.**

I'll never forget the day I attended my first Council orientation, a few days after being elected. George Cuff was doing his regular brilliant job of candidly informing Councillors of what they'd signed on for, and many of the newly elected were unable to hide their "deer in the headlights" expression. One person actually took me aside and said, "Danielle! Do you think it's true? Does being on Council really involve so much *time*???" Oy. This is why you're given a nomination package before you make your decision. It tells you these sorts of things. Read it. Like, ahead of nomination day.

But don't stop there. Read minutes, reports, newspaper editorials, blog posts, public commentaries, and, most importantly, the Municipal Government Act! Attend council

meetings, public hearings and open houses. Ask current and former Councillors if you can interview them. And or goodness' sake, before you take a position on an issue, get as much background information (from as many points of view) as possible. Don't make yourself look silly and/or perpetuate misinformation and ignorance by opining without the facts.

If you're going to be an effective Councillor, you're going to do everything in your power to make informed, constructive decisions.

If you're a good citizen, you want voters to be properly informed too.

4. You are prepared to be part of a team.

This is a biggie. Whether you intend to become Mayor or Councillor, you are asking to join a *team*. You are there to make a contribution, and you should definitely do that. But you have one vote and a duty to make decisions.

At the Council table, you have five basic functions:

- Inform yourself

- Debate

- Carefully consider the information, opinions and positions of your fellow Councillors and administration

- Vote

- Accept the decision of the group

You're not there to be the official opposition – there's no such thing in municipal politics. If you are there for the right reasons, you care more about making good progress for your community than you do about the public's perception, your voting record, or grandstanding to score popularity points. Councils have to make some tough decisions at times that people may not understand or like. You have a responsibility to engage citizens and consider their input, absolutely. But you still need to do the right thing, even if it's not popular. A note to voters: just say no to seat-warmers and lone rangers.

5. You're a long-term thinker, prepared to build for the future.

Perhaps as many as half of your decisions on Council will be to lay the foundations for things you won't be around to see come to fruition. Even the immediate and seemingly short-term decisions you make can have lasting consequences. If you're more of a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants and live-for-the-moment type of person, it's unlikely that Council is the place for you. It's not so much about action-packed excitement; it's more about developing good policy and keeping the poop flowing through the pipes.

6. You can remain committed to serving the community and doing what you believe is best, no matter what.

We end where we began. In fact, you may have noticed that it's kind of a running theme through this post: be fully committed. Love your community. Never forget that you are a steward of the public trust, and that you took an oath to act in the public interest.

Good leaders – as opposed to good politicians – are willing to sacrifice personal gain for the good of the community.

It's entirely likely that you will be criticized and perhaps even maligned. For some reason, some people have this odd belief that as soon as a person becomes a public figure, it's okay to heap upon them personal insults and engage in sometimes vicious character assassination. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but you need to be prepared — it could happen to you. If you can't speak to people in a respectful manner when they're being completely ill-mannered toward you... if you can't stay the course in the face of conflict and criticism... you should reconsider your candidacy.

Don't get me wrong: most people are really decent. They are thinking people, reasonable people, supportive people. Their engagement and encouragement, along with your personal satisfaction in a job well done, makes it all worthwhile. But if you think it's all going to be sunshine and roses and everyone is just going to love you all the time, you're going to have a very difficult time.

Don't be discouraged by the challenges I mention. If you reflect on this list and can honestly say that all, or even most, of this list accurately represents your motives for throwing your hat into the ring, you're on the right track. You're going to be a good Councillor.