



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

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Grassroots women's mayoral forum sheds light on key issues

On October 8th, over 60 women gathered at the Circle of Life Thunderbird House on Treaty One territory to share their views on municipal issues and address mayoral candidates. This forum was different than any of the many mayoral forums in the Winnipeg election, and is a model to learn from in future civic engagement efforts.

The gathering was created to bring women together to share their views, learn about city responsibilities and engage candidates on issues of concern to women. When a gender lens is applied, municipal governments can address inequalities that affect women. The event was organized by North Point Douglas Women's Centre, West Central Women's Resource Centre and Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba and attended mostly by women associated with each organization.

Before meeting with the candidates, a facilitated group exercise was carried out to identify the most urgent concerns from which to draw questions for the mayoral hopefuls. Participants were divided into small groups, which remained the same for the whole process and rotated to discuss each of four topics: housing, recreation and libraries, transportation, safety and police.

Women vigorously called for a plan to deal effectively with homelessness, as well as for more units of affordable, decent and safe housing; stronger by-law enforcement was

also often mentioned as a requirement to deal with safety and general conditions of rental housing.

Community recreational centres were recognized as potential tools for crime prevention, and women asked candidates to support longer operational hours, so centres are accessible to everyone including busy parents, single mothers and their children. Moreover, women want City Hall to improve safety in spaces like parks, recreation centres and pools that many women and young girls identify currently as unsafe.

While discussing transportation, key issues were bus coverage, unheated shelters and cost of public transit. Participants called for the introduction of 24/7 transit and low-income passes and the extension of the free Downtown Spirit Bus, without raising fares. In addition, many women, elders and people with disabilities face impaired mobility due to the condition of sidewalks, and participants want consistent and timely sidewalk snow clearing.

Participating women shared common concerns on racism and prejudice many of face on a daily basis. Women called for better training for police staff and increased positive interaction between police and the community.

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After discussion within the groups, the facilitators summarised and posted the main concerns. From these, participants were invited to prioritize their top issues to present to the candidates. Attending candidates Brian Bowman, Paula Havixbeck, and Judy Wasylycia-Leis answered the most pressing questions posed by participants themselves.

The bottom-up approach of the forum created a space where women from marginalised communities - mostly poor, racialized, and from Indigenous and recent immigrant backgrounds - felt comfortable sharing and discussing. While men were welcome to attend, they were asked to respect that this was a time organized for women's voices to be heard. One facilitator noted that every single participant offered their opinions enthusiastically, something she observes only rarely in the standard format forums.

Participants commented on how much they learned simply by sharing and listening to one another. Some women were surprised to hear that women from other communities shared their fear of violence, and employed some of the same strategies to be safe. Others talked about how much they learned about city services from the group work. Others still said that, for the first time, they had been in the same room as a politician, never mind speaking directly to one.

One facilitator remarked: "Lots of people don't necessarily know who to talk to when they have a complaint. What is the Mayor in charge of? What is the Premier in charge of? These women now know what issues the Mayor works on, and therefore what they can bring to the table to talk about. That matters a lot."

While sharing their personal stories and struggles, women told the group that they were not alone and others like them had the same problems. This process created a space for women's collective voices to be heard.

Attendance at this event is telling. Grassroots women are very careful about where and on what to spend their time, a priceless good. By showing up, they sent the strong message that women's issues matter and should be seriously addressed by the City. On the candidate's side, only three out of seven mayoral candidates attended the forum. Some women pointed out how absentee candidates had also avoided other forums that were focusing on poverty or the inner city. One of the participating woman sums it up: "All candidates have the same time in a day; yet, some participate, others don't. Where they go shows where their commitment is".

The forum shows that when space is created for women to participate and share their perspectives, women have the answers to the challenges they face on a daily basis. They just need a city hall willing to listen, take action and adopt a gender lens.

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