



# Lead Where You Live

A guide to running for  
municipal council

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## Introduction



From clean drinking water, affordable housing and childcare, to good roads and safe streets, Ontario's 444 municipal governments provide the services that people rely on most, every day. Collectively, they own more infrastructure than the provincial and federal governments combined, and each year they manage budgets totalling more than \$65 billion.

Municipal government is important. Well-run governments are led by strong councils, and municipal councils are more effective when good, qualified candidates step forward to serve on them.

Elected municipal leaders play a vital role in making sure that communities are healthy and successful, socially and economically. Councils shape priorities, ensure accountability to the public, and represent the people who elect them. They provide a democratic forum for diverse perspectives and experiences to be heard, so that better decisions are made and good governance is maintained. Having people with a variety of backgrounds and lived experiences on council helps the municipality better meet the needs of all residents and businesses.

If you are thinking of running for election in 2026, this guide will introduce you to some of the key steps in that process. It will also give you a sense of what life is like as an elected member of a municipal council.

## Municipal Councils



Councils represent the best interests of the public and the municipal government. They develop policies and programs. They determine what services are provided. And they ensure that the municipality is well run by qualified municipal staff.

That last point is key. Elected officials provide strategic direction and oversight. The day-to-day work of municipal governments is provided by municipal employees. That means you do not have to be a municipal expert before you run for office. Councils are supported by a Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) or City Manager, clerk, and other senior municipal staff who work with elected representatives to ensure that responsibilities are met.

Diversity is important to municipal government. Councils benefit when people with different life experiences and skills come together to make a positive impact on their community. AMO created the *We All Win* campaign in 2021 to encourage more candidates from diverse communities to participate in Ontario municipal elections. Since then, AMO has expanded its work through the Healthy Democracy Project to support democracy on a number of fronts. The project [homepage](#) provides more information, links to helpful organizations and resources.

Once elected, councillors are expected to learn and adhere to municipal policies and procedures, as well as provincial legislations such as the [Municipal Act](#). Municipal staff often assist with that education, and organizations like the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) offer training programs for elected representatives.

## Service on Council

You will be expected to dedicate four years to the position, with the understanding that it involves more than attending meetings and reviewing agenda packages.

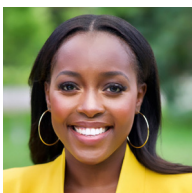
The role of an elected municipal official includes:

- Being a community ambassador, advocating for the needs of your community and your municipal government.
- Developing a working relationship with your fellow councillors and municipal staff that's built on mutual trust and respect.
- Serving on committees related to areas such as planning, policing, or economic development.
- Helping to set the municipal budget, priorities and policies.
- Listening and learning from your residents, so you may best represent their interests.
- Attending conferences, educational sessions and community events.
- Reviewing documents and participating in meaningful discussions.

Service on council can change other aspects of your life, positively and negatively. Most councillors look back on it as an honour and a rewarding experience. However, it can present challenges.

- It may change your relationships with your friends, family and colleagues. You or your council make may decisions they do not like.
- You will attend several meetings a month and be expected to review a lot of information.
- People will want to engage with you in person, on the phone, by text and email, and through a wide range of social media platforms. It can feel overwhelming.
- The public can have high expectations and you may be asked to address matters that are well beyond your authority, influence or control.
- You may face harsh criticism or behaviour from people at meetings, in public, or on social media.
- There are significant legal liabilities. Failing to perform your duties can have consequences.
- You will be involved in matters that require you to keep certain kinds of information private and confidential.

You may want to find out how much councillors and mayors earn in your municipality as part of your decision-making process. But, also consider there are perks of the job that money can't buy, like opportunities for learning, skill-building, networking, and having the opportunity to participate in municipal decision-making on behalf of your community.



**"You have to work with your council colleagues and not everything will go your way, or things you worked for may get overturned. It can be hard, but it is all part of the democratic process. The important thing is that it's an open and respectful debate."**

– MP Arielle Kayabaga, London West, Former City of London Councillor

# The Structure of Municipal Government

The head of a local or municipal council is normally called a mayor or the reeve, and the members of council are normally called councillors or aldermen. The head of council serves as the voice of their council, reflecting consensus.

Council sets the strategic direction for the corporation. Municipal staff carry out those decisions and provide services to taxpayers. The Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) or City Manager is the most senior staff member.

It's also a common misconception that a single councillor can bring change forth for taxpayers. It's council as a body that makes decisions and sets policy, not individual councillors.



## Managing Your Campaign

Once you have made the decision to run for an elected position, there's work to be done. **May 1, 2026**, is the first day to file nomination papers.

Everyone running for council must meet the same criteria:

- A resident, a non-resident owner, or tenant of land in the municipality, or the spouse of a non-resident owner or tenant
- A Canadian citizen
- At least 18 years old
- Legally eligible to vote
- Not disqualified by any legislation from holding municipal office

Candidates must **not** be:

- An inmate of a penal or correctional institution under sentence of imprisonment
- Any person not eligible to vote in the municipality
- A staff member of the municipality, UNLESS he or she takes an unpaid leave of absence during the campaign period and resigns once elected to office
- A judge of any court
- A member of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, a Senator, or a member of the House of Commons

Your nomination must be endorsed by 25 eligible electors (voters) in the municipality, and you must pay a nomination fee of \$100 for councillors and \$200 for heads of council (mayor or reeve). You cannot begin campaigning until the municipal clerk accepts your paperwork as complete.



**"The highlight of working in municipal government is the public interaction and meeting so many people throughout the city. I continue to learn and grow because of it."**

– Kristin Murray, City of Timmins Councillor

# 2026 Municipal Election: Key Dates

**MAY 1, 2026**

## FIRST DAY TO FILE A NOMINATION

You will require:

- A signed nomination paper delivered to the clerk
- ID proving that you meet local eligibility criteria
- A form showing that 25 voters endorse your candidacy
- The nomination filing fee of either \$100 or \$200

**AUGUST 21, 2026**

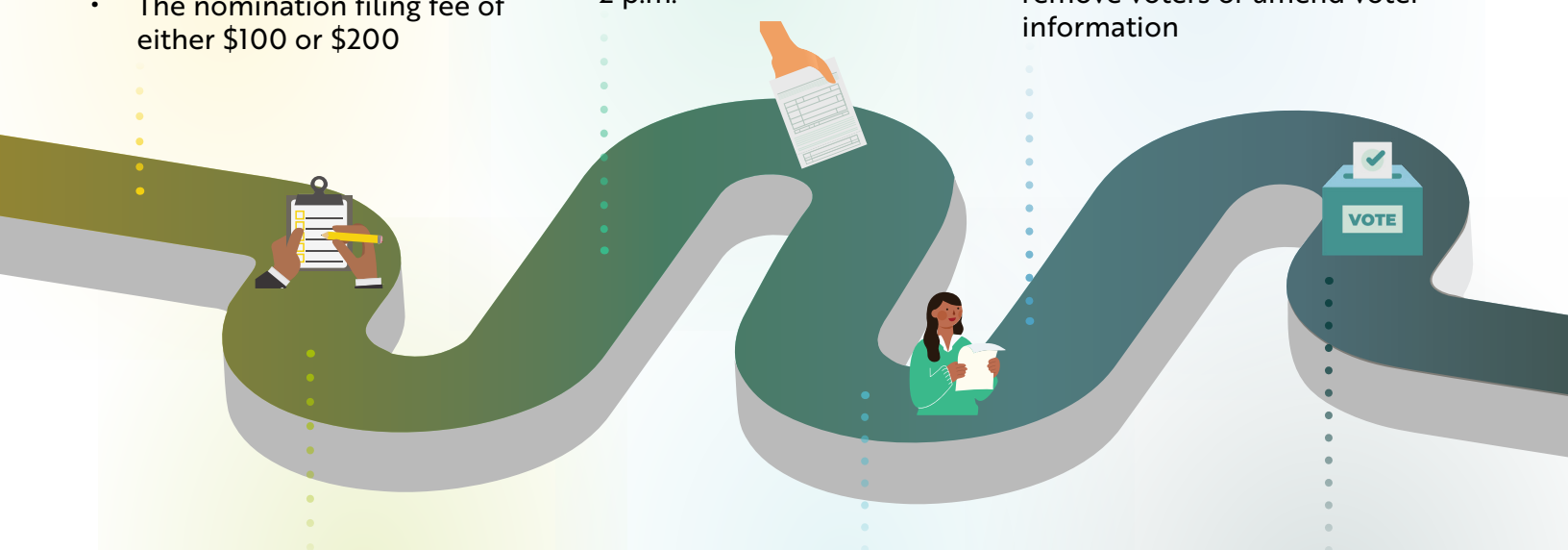
## FINAL NOMINATION DAY

- All candidates must file paperwork by 2 p.m.
- This is the last day for candidates to withdraw their nomination by providing written correspondence to the clerk by no later than 2 p.m.

**SEPTEMBER 1, 2026**

## VOTERS LIST IS FINALIZED

- Candidates now have access to the voter list. Members of the public can access the list, but only to confirm they are on it, and that their information is correct
- From now until election day, requests can be made to the clerk to amend the list to add or remove voters or amend voter information



**AUGUST 2026**

## ELECTIONS ONTARIO TO DELIVER THE VOTER LIST

- Elections Canada provides the municipality with the voter list
- The clerk reviews this list to add and remove names and/or adjust voter information

**AUGUST 24, 2026**

## CANDIDATES ARE CERTIFIED

- All candidates will be certified by the clerk by 4 p.m.
- Acclamations are announced

**OCTOBER 26, 2026**

## VOTING DAY

- While some municipalities may have already held advance poles since September 26, 2026, this is the official election day
- Voting places are open from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. unless otherwise established by the clerk



**“The most important thing for candidates is to understand the job. Many people get drawn into local politics over a single issue. The role is bigger than that. It is really about what you want growth to look like and thinking strategically about the future, not about micromanaging services.”**

– Former AMO President,  
Mayor Lynn Dollin, Town of Innisfil

# Welcome to the Spotlight

Municipal candidates attract attention. In fact, it is hard to get elected without it. You may have to give speeches, participate in debates, or give media interviews.

Increasingly, there is pressure to engage with audiences using social media platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook or Instagram. Campaign styles vary, but here are some approaches that many seasoned election winners follow.

## Social media:

- Simple ideas and information tend to build confidence and trust more than complicated ideas. Find ways to explain complicated things simply, fairly and accurately in your posts.
- Memorable messages are often simple, colourful and credible. To gain traction on social media, you will want to use compelling photos or videos to tell your story.
- You do not need to create a lot of social media content or be an expert on every topic. Often, the most practical approach is to lead people to useful, credible information that others have created.
- Focus on being helpful. Remember that the person you are at odds with today could be someone you work with tomorrow. This is important when tackling challenges or looking for the right words on social media. How do you want to be remembered?
- Create a social media plan for yourself. Why are you on it? What platforms will you use? What issues will you focus on? How much of your personal life will you share? Who will manage the account?
- Always think about your online audience before you choose your words. Think about how you can connect with your audience quickly, give them something useful, and make what you're explaining interesting.
- Remember it's rare to win a debate on social media and keep in mind your audience is potential voters. Rather than responding emotionally, listen to what the person is saying, focus on valid concerns, and respond in a way that inspires confidence and trust in the larger audience that is watching.

## Media relations:

- No matter how urgent the request is, carve out some time to gather your thoughts, plan your response and focus your message.
- If you expect media at an event, try to think ahead of time about what message you most want to get across.
- You will not have the answers to every question. No one does and you should be comfortable with that. Focus on what you do know, and the story that you want to tell.
- If you have a lot to explain, or the topic is complicated, make sure you can start with a simple sentence or two that captures what is happening, or what you want, and *why*.
- End the interview with a strong summary of your message. This will help shape the final story.



# Campaign Finance

Campaign finance rules ensure a fair election for everyone. Once a candidate files nomination papers, they should open a bank account specifically for campaign expenses and contributions.

The candidate and/or the person managing their campaign is responsible for keeping financial records, and there are rules to follow during an election campaign, as well as when the campaign is over. Candidates can't use a personal bank account to operate their campaign, even if they have very few expenses. It's important to keep good records.

These expectations are simple, and important. If you are subject to an Election Compliance Audit, failure to meet spending limits and campaign rules can cost you your seat on council.

Receipts and dates issued for campaign contributions, as well as the contributor's name and address. Any one candidate can receive a maximum campaign contribution up to \$1,200. If an individual is supporting more than one candidate, their contribution total can't be more than \$5,000. It's important you keep records for any contributions you receive – even cash contributions under \$100.

The terms and conditions of loans received at a bank or lending institution (the loan itself is not considered a campaign contribution).

Receipts for your own campaign contributions / expenses.

The funds raised and expenses incurred at fundraising events.

The value of contributions, if you receive support in the form of goods instead of money, along with the contributor's name and address.

Also keep in mind:

- Businesses cannot contribute to a campaign. However, business owners can donate as individuals.
- There are limits on campaign expenses. The Clerk's Office can provide this information to candidates.
- Candidates must provide their campaign financial statements to the municipal clerk by the last Friday in March of year following the election (for October 2026, this would be March 2027). Failure to do so could result in penalties, or an inability to run in subsequent elections.



**"Campaigning successfully is hard work. You have to put yourself out there and just outwork everyone else. You have to start early and just keep knocking on doors, so people get to know you."**

– Jasvinder Sandhu, Healthy Democracy Project Chair,  
Former Town of Oakville Councillor



## Campaign Rules

The campaign period begins as soon as nomination forms have been filed by the municipal clerk.

Each municipality has rules around signage.

Some local governments don't allow for signage to be posted until at least eight weeks prior to election day.

This can vary, so be sure to check with your local municipal clerk.

There are some campaign rules that all candidates must follow:

- Candidates cannot use a municipal property to support events, activities or meetings related to their campaign. This includes municipally owned phones, computers, supplies or staff time.
- Municipal staff cannot participate in partisan political activities for candidates.
- In most municipalities, campaign signs are required to be on private property, and usually are not allowed on municipal or provincial property, including provincial highways. Municipal staff have the right to remove signs that break this rule. It's best to check with your respective municipality to confirm where signs can go.
- Candidates have the right to access apartment buildings, condominiums, non-profit housing units and gated communities, between the hours of 9 a.m. to 8 p.m., and tenants are allowed to place campaign signs in windows.
- Candidates and advertisers must identify themselves on all signs.

Sometimes campaign expenses exceed contributions and candidates are left with a deficit. It is possible to extend a campaign past election day to try and raise money to offset expenses by submitting appropriate paper work to the municipal clerk.

## Election Day and Alternative Voting

Election day is **October 26, 2026**. In-person voting will be available on this day. Locations and times vary between municipalities, but they must be open a minimum of nine hours.

In addition to using traditional paper ballots, your municipality may allow people to vote by phone, internet or mail.

Election staff are sworn to confidentiality and professionalism and are not allowed to tamper with anyone's vote, as outlined in the [Municipal Elections Act](#). The Act says the election should be accessible to voters, and that secrecy and confidentiality of the individual is paramount.

Candidates have a right to be at the voting station on election day, provided they are not campaigning in any way. They are not allowed to pressure, influence or intimidate voters or staff working at the election poll. They can only observe. Alternatively, candidates may have what is called a "scrutineer" present on election day. This person must come to the polls with written authority, signed by the candidate, to observe the polls in place of a candidate.

On election day, the candidate or the scrutineer can:

- View the Voters' List to see who has voted, as long as this doesn't interfere with the act of voting.
- Ask for clarification on why a voter is getting assistance.
- Examine ballots when they are being counted and object to any that are marked incorrectly or unclear.

Vote counts begin immediately after the polls close. This may be done manually, if the municipality is using paper ballots, or electronically. The clerk will have already established the count method at least 60 days prior to election or advanced voting day.

During this time, candidates and appointed scrutineers may be present and can watch the ballot count. If a candidate or scrutineer objects to a ballot, the deputy returning officer will note the objection and make the final decision about counting the ballot.

Once a ballot box has been counted, it will be sealed by the deputy returning officer and delivered, along with the statement of results, to the clerk.

## Alternative Voting – Why?

- ✓ Allows eligible electors to vote from anywhere around the world
- ✓ Allows for advanced voting ahead of election day
- ✓ Can be more cost effective for municipalities
- ✓ Allows staff to take equipment to places like long-term care homes
- ✓ Is more accessible for everyone with options other than paper and pencil

# After the Election

Win or lose, candidates have some responsibilities to perform after the election.

Financial statements have to be filed with the clerk. If needed, you can ask for a campaign extension to address a financial deficit.

Candidates must remove all campaign signs or the municipality may remove them and bill you for the expense.

## Resources

Although this document doesn't get into the ins and outs of council and council meetings, there are a few things you may want to get familiar with during your campaign, so you are prepared should you be elected.

After the election, AMO will be providing a range of training and resources to help incoming councillors navigate the ins and outs of council meetings, legislation, staff-council relationships, conflict of interest and so much more.

### Here are some links:

- [Conflict of Interest Act](#)
- [Council Transparency and the Role of the Integrity Commissioner](#)
- [Municipal Elections Act](#)
- [Accessibility for Ontarians With Disabilities Act](#)
- [Planning Act](#)

## The Municipal Act

All municipalities follow the [Municipal Act](#), which identifies the powers and jurisdiction of municipal governments. It defines how municipal governments function in terms of open and closed meetings, procedure, policy, accountability and transparency. It helps municipalities establish a Code of Conduct for elected officials, and very clearly identifies what authority municipalities have.

The *Municipal Act* is a long document. Councillors are not expected to memorize or understand every section. Knowing the *Municipal Act* well is mainly the role of the clerk, CAO or city manager.

You may want to take note of Section 239(2), which relates to closed meetings. Municipalities are the most open and the transparent order of government. Information can only be kept private under limited and specific circumstances. Just as there are rules to demand that government is open and transparent, there are legal responsibilities to keep some kinds of information private and confidential. It is important that everyone understands these rules.



**“Municipal elections are about the future of our communities, the places that we call home. Win or lose, every candidate makes a difference by respectfully debating priorities. We congratulate all who choose to run for demonstrating their commitment to their municipality.”**

– Former AMO President,  
Mayor Jamie McGarvey, Town of Parry Sound

## Candidate support organizations

There are local and national candidate support organizations that can help candidates navigate the election process and experience. These organizations support candidates in different ways based on geographies and demographics. Candidates don't have to run without support.

If you would like to see the various types of resources provided by these groups, please take a look at the candidate supports catalogue in AMO's [Local Democracy Solutions Bank](#).

Organization	Link
electHER NOW	<a href="http://electhernow.ca">electhernow.ca</a>
Equal Voice	<a href="http://equalvoice.ca">equalvoice.ca</a>
Guelph Campaign School	<a href="http://municipalcampaignschool.ca/Guelph">municipalcampaignschool.ca/Guelph</a>
Leadership féminin Prescott-Russell	<a href="http://leadershipfemininpr.ca">leadershipfemininpr.ca</a>
Nominee	<a href="http://gonominee.com">gonominee.com</a>
Operation Black Vote Canada	<a href="http://obvc.ca">obvc.ca</a>
Oxford Campaign School	<a href="http://municipalcampaignschool.ca/oxford">municipalcampaignschool.ca/oxford</a>
PoliticsNOW	<a href="http://polinow.org">polinow.org</a>
ProudPolitics	<a href="http://proudpolitics.org">proudpolitics.org</a>
The Canadian-Muslim Vote	<a href="http://canadianmuslimvote.ca">canadianmuslimvote.ca</a>
The Jean Collective	<a href="http://thejeancollective.ca">thejeancollective.ca</a>
Waterloo Region Women's Campaign School	<a href="http://wrwomenrun.wordpress.com">wrwomenrun.wordpress.com</a>
Wellington Campaign School	<a href="http://municipalcampaignschool.ca/wellington">municipalcampaignschool.ca/wellington</a>



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