

# Communicating the Value of Municipal Government

GUIDE FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS



## WHAT IS THE GUIDE?



This **conversation guide** is designed for municipal government elected officials, and their staff, to assist in **facilitating and participating in effective conversations regarding the value of municipal government** and the many ways in which municipalities address important issues in the community.



This guide includes **discussion prompts** to help you in facilitating effective and engaging discussions on municipal governance as part of a Municipal Rep Day visit, or other conversations with youth.



This resource was created as part of the ***Municipal Rep Day pilot project***, coordinated by **CIVIX** in collaboration with the **Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO)**. AMO is excited to support its members in building understanding and engagement with municipal governments in local communities across Ontario.

# WHAT IS REP DAY?

AMO understands the important role its members have in engaging locally on the work of their Councils. This occurs in schools, from primary to post secondary, as well as local clubs, associations and others.

CIVIX has been engaging with federal MPs on the Rep Day initiative since 2013. This has been highly successful and engaging. Based on the level of success, AMO engaged with CIVIX to create the Rep Day program for municipal officials.

**Rep Day** connects students with their elected representatives for an in-person meeting. Rep Day aims to build understanding and interest (passion) of young people regarding politicians and the political process. Given the current political climate, Rep Day provides an opportunity to break down assumptions, biases and other feelings around the political process and politicians. Rep Day is an important opportunity to support young people to develop a better understanding of and sense of trust in the people and institutions within our democracy.

## STATS


- 100% of federal MPs surveyed said that the Rep Day program is useful for increasing their presence in schools (stronger local presence).
- 99% of educators agreed that Rep Day increased students' knowledge of government and the role and responsibilities of elected representatives.
- 99% of educators agreed that Rep Day improved students' attitudes towards being an active and informed citizen.



# STRUCTURING THE MUNICIPAL REP DAY VISIT

Below is a brief outline of how the meeting between a municipal elected representative and a classroom of students could be organized. It is suggested that the elected representative, or their staff, connect with the educator leading the class in advance to determine the format and structure of the visit.

Discussion prompts are included throughout this guide, if students are hesitant to ask their own questions.



1

**Welcome (2 mins)** – Moderator welcomes the elected representative & outlines the structures of the meeting.

2

**Opening introduction (10-15 mins)** – Brief opening remarks from the elected representative.

3

**Icebreaker activity (5 mins)** – Engage in an activity or light discussion to ease into the conversation.

4

**Q&A: local reps and current issues (20-30 mins)** – Students ask the elected representative about themselves, their role, municipal government and local issues of interest.

5

**Final remarks and close (3-5 mins)** – Final remarks from the elected representative. ‘Thank you’ from designated students. Group photo opportunity, if permitted.

# BREAKING THE ICE WITH STUDENTS



Below is a brief outline of how the meeting between a municipal elected representative and a classroom of students could be organized. It is suggested that the elected representative, or their staff, connect with the educator leading the class in advance to determine the format and structure of the visit.

## Rep Day Discussion Prompts:

“What do you think politicians are like?”

“Why do you think people decide to run for political office or want to become a politician?”

“Show of hands – Have you ever met one of your elected representatives before?”\*

\*Discuss more in-depth with those who respond that they have.

# UNDERSTANDING MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

Most constituents – young or old – may know that there are three orders of government in Canada. But they may not fully understand which order of government is responsible for what, especially when some of those responsibilities are shared.

As a municipally elected representative, you have the opportunity to explain the basics of your local government and how it builds and sustains the community. For example, who are the different members of council, how and when they are elected, what are the expectations for accountability and transparency, and what the responsibilities of a municipal government are.

## Rep Day Discussion Prompts:

“Can you name some ways that our municipal government provides services to the community?”

Do not be surprised if you receive few if any responses!

“Follow-up question – Have you ever had your garbage picked up, or played at a park? Those are interactions with our municipal government!”



# MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT IS MORE THAN JUST SERVICE DELIVERY



Municipal government provides a wide range of service delivery. In fact, if you look out a window you would be hard pressed to see something that municipal governments *do not touch*.

Municipal government is responsible for the delivery of basic services, such as garbage collection or park maintenance. But local governments also address much broader-scale issues that are most relevant to people – day in and day out. At its heart, municipal government is about effecting change, building community resilience and helping communities respond effectively to these changes and challenges.

Major issues such as homelessness, mental health, equity, climate change and encampments are taken on by municipal governments every day, in many different ways. Come prepared with some tangible examples of how your local government has meaningfully addressed a topical issue.

For example, many communities are experiencing a housing crisis, with affordable places to live being very difficult to find. Municipal governments are very active in addressing issues such as housing through the planning and review of new housing developments, developing and enforcing zone by-laws, and providing subsidized housing to those in need, among just a few examples.

Municipalities also play a role in building relationships within the community, both through social and recreational programs, and by working with community partners to address other major issues.

## Rep Day Discussion Prompt:

- “Can you please share some of your priorities and /or values for our community?”
  - As issues are shared, take some time to explain how the municipal government can address those issues, where applicable.
  - Allow some time for the audience to respond, and offer their own suggestions for what could be done, or improved.

# MANY MEANINGFUL WAYS TO GET INVOLVED

Rep Day is an opportunity for you to “light the fire” for future municipal leaders. This is an opportunity to share your passion and reasons for committing to public service, the impact one can have and the lives that are affected by committed local leadership.

There are many ways to be meaningfully, enthusiastically and respectfully involved in your community. This can be through democratic participation or engagement, but there are so many more avenues that can be pursued. Voting in a municipal election is not the only way to show that you care about your community, especially for students.

Remember that some racialized or vulnerable community members may be less likely to engage democratically but may instead participate in other forms of community building and support.

By providing examples of the many ways that local government does support the issues that people are passionate about, you can make connections between how people connect their own engagement to the actions of the municipal council.

Rep Day provides an opportunity to highlight the importance of all voices being engaged in local matters. You have an opportunity to provide examples of ways those who may not feel municipal government is a place for them, can get involved, such as volunteering, participating in town halls, letter and email writing, social media, and providing direct support to those in need. For youth, suggestions could include joining a youth group or youth council, or becoming a student trustee for the school board.

## Rep Day Discussion Prompts:

- “What are some of the other ways you can be involved in your community?”
- “If you don’t feel you can get involved, what would need to change to make that possible?”





# ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES ARE PEOPLE TOO

It is important to remind others that elected representatives and municipal government employees are real people. They're parents, children and grandparents; workers, commuters and volunteers. They are human!

Municipally elected officials are personally impacted by the decisions they make, and by the comments directed to them. While being an elected official can be a part-time or full-time position, they live in the same neighbourhoods as constituents, and are open and accessible to criticism.

It is important to understand that almost any citizen can become an elected official – just as anyone can be involved in their community, run for office, and work for their municipal government. Municipal government is the order of government where it is easiest to have your voice heard, and to see the impact of those efforts. Having more candidates means a more competitive race, and strengthens diverse representation for the local community. The more voters see themselves represented in politics, the more likely they are to turn out to vote, meaning we all win in a stronger, more resilient democracy.

## **Rep Day Discussion Prompts:**

- "Show of hands – Who here has ever thought about running for office?"
  - Discuss more in-depth with those who respond that they have.
- "What would you do if you were an elected representative?"

# WHY THESE CONVERSATIONS ARE IMPORTANT



By recognizing that municipal government is made up of dedicated community members who are addressing important issues impacting our community, and that there are many different ways to get involved, there is a real opportunity to improve understanding of the importance and value of municipal government.

Whether it is through a program like Rep Day, or the regular meetings or events you participate in as an elected official, these conversations are crucial to building a greater understanding of why municipal government matters. By demonstrating that municipal government is an effective way of generating change, and by understanding that municipal offices are made up of real citizens living in their communities, young people are given an opportunity to understand the real value of local decision making.

How we have these conversations matter, too. A decline in civility is happening across all avenues of public discourse. Elected officials often feel the brunt of this through harassment, making it harder to do their jobs – sometimes undermining the important work of municipalities and the impact they have. It could be helpful to share with students examples of dealing with different opinions and perspectives as an elected official, and how you navigated them. We need a renewed focus on ensuring that the conversations we have are constructive.

Rep Day, and all of your local engagements, provide a forum to advance constructive, engaging, local democracy.

## **Rep Day Discussion Prompt:**

- “Politics can make people upset, which can make it hard to talk to each other. What are some things we can do to make these discussions easier?”

# LEARN MORE

For more information on this Conversation Guide, or the Municipal Rep Day pilot program, please contact CIVIX at [hello@civix.ca](mailto:hello@civix.ca).

CIVIX is a non-partisan, Canadian charity dedicated to strengthening democracy through civic education. [civix.ca](http://civix.ca)

For additional resources on facilitating effective discussions, learn more about the CIVIX PoliTalks program. [politalks.ca](http://politalks.ca)

CIVIX is proud to partner with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) to facilitate the Municipal Rep Day pilot program. [www.amo.on.ca](http://www.amo.on.ca)

[www.repday.ca/muni](http://www.repday.ca/muni)





**Presented by CIVIX & the Association of  
Municipalities of Ontario**