

Healthy Democracy Forum
Remarks for HDP Advisory Group Welcome by Petra Wolfbeiss
Sunday October 20, 2024
Westin Harbour Castle Toronto – Regatta Room
Approximately 8:45 am

Good morning everyone. Welcome to day two of AMO's inaugural Healthy Democracy Forum.

Welcome to the Healthy Democracy Forum if you are just joining us this morning.

And welcome back if you were with us yesterday. I hope you had a great night and are ready to get back at it!

I'll start with a land acknowledgment to centre this work as we get started.

We recognize that our work at AMO, and the work of our members, takes place on traditional Indigenous territories across Ontario.

Today, while this meeting includes people who have joined from across the province, we are currently assembled in Toronto, which was founded on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

We recognize and respect the history, languages, knowledge, and cultures of the First Nations, Metis, Inuit and all Indigenous peoples whose presence continues to enrich our communities.

Reconciliation work is a personal learning journey. I'm fortunate to have the opportunity to work closely with and learn from the AMO Indigenous Advisory Council. With their guidance and leadership, we are currently in the process of developing AMO's first Reconciliation Action Plan.

It is a plan that will play an important role for the future of our organization and that will support our members in their own municipal Indigenous relations and reconciliation.

I look forward to continuing to grow both personally and professionally as I continue along this profound learning path.

As Jasvinder Sandhu, our Healthy Democracy Project Advisory Group Chair, said yesterday, this weekend, and today in particular, is a tipping point for the Healthy Democracy Project.

And you'll see that expressed throughout today's program.

From our early work establishing new partnerships, foundational research, and learning from past projects, to new initiatives and approaches, Beta version solutions, and measurement and evaluation.

Today will be a journey.

One that encompasses the last two years of this project. And, in fact, further back than that.

I'd actually say it's more like an adventure. And the groundwork was laid through the leadership of the AMO Board of Directors:

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- In 2021, AMO's Board approved strategic objectives included advancing diversity, equity and inclusion in municipal governance
- We then developed and ran the *We All Win* campaign in the lead up to the 2022 municipal elections to attract more diverse candidates to municipal office.
- In November 2022, the AMO Board approved our 4-year Healthy Democracy Project strategy with a \$1 million investment to promote and support healthy democracies in Ontario.

The AMO Board includes 43 municipal leaders from across the province representing every region and every size of municipality.

And that's really the centre, the soul of our work. We consider the differing needs of our members, Ontario's municipally elected officials, and we celebrate the differences that come from the many different combinations of geographic and population size diversity.

And while there is certainly difference—what we also know through the research, what we hear regularly from our members, and what we see in the news, is that many of our democratic challenges are shared:

- Growing online, in person, and workplace toxicity and harassment experienced by candidates, elected officials, and municipal staff
- Rising polarization, miss and disinformation
- Loss of local media
- Disengaged communities and more

All that has led to the following results

- Fewer people running
- Making for many more acclamations
- And alarmingly low voter turnout.

These are big challenges with big, troubling implications.

And yet hope abounds.

I think Canadians have largely felt that our democracies and democratic institutions were secure and could withstand any challenge.

I also think we're now well aware that's not the case. And we're aware that these are big, hairy, complex, systemic problems that need a system-wide, sector-wide response.

It's rooms like this that fill our hope buckets.

And in this room, we all have our own lanes or spheres of influence.

AMO's lane? Municipal, locally elected officials, who we support with education, conferences, co-operative procurement, and coordinated advocacy.

And when our lanes converge, when we align and collaborate, we can make sustained progress together.

Much more than on our own.

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It's in that spirit, that I welcome one of our inspirations. Someone who loves and appreciates the role and purpose of municipalities.

She is a legal aid lawyer and politician.

The first woman to be elected mayor of Cornwall, Ontario.

And the first Black woman to serve as a mayor in Ontario.

We're also proud to count her as a friend and a member of our Healthy Democracy Project Advisory Group.

Please welcome, Senator Bernadette Clement.