**Healthy Democracy Forum**

**Remarks for AMO President Robin Jones**

**Saturday Octobert 19, 2024**

**Westin Harbour Castle Toronto – Room to be provided**

**8:45 am**

Good morning, **bon matin and aaniin,** and thank you for joining us today, and for dedicating your weekend to this very importantissue.

Most people in the room would agree that municipal government is the government closest to the people.

We depend on municipalities to provide essential services – although not everyone knows or appreciates the value or role of municipal governments.

Our cities, towns and villages are experiencing a lot of change.

Municipal councils and staff must confront tough challenges and seek new opportunities – whether it’s housing, homelessness, welcoming newcomers or creating a thriving local economy.

In a healthy democracy, people turn out to vote, those with different backgrounds and perspectives are valued, and debate is respectful.

Not everyone will agree on everything. The trick is to remember that everyone shares at least one common goal – to live a good quality of life in a thriving community.

In recent years, our public discourse has become dominated by anger and apathy rather than compassion and courage.

There are a lot of reasons. You’ve heard them - social media, COVID, economic stress. And in my own personal opinion, what happens south of the boarder.

Change is rapid. It makes people fearful. Fearful of the unknown and of losing what they care about. Anger is just fear in disguise.

The lack of civility is taking a deep toll on local government and the people who serve within it. Data shows that fewer people are running for municipal office, and acclamations are rising.

Distrust of government and bullying of municipal staff and council, both online and in real life, is common.

Municipal councils do not always reflect a diversity of backgrounds and identities in the community.

While governments across Canada and beyond face these challenges, at AMO we understand that change starts in the community, with boots on the ground, with people who want to make their hometowns better.

It starts in our neighbourhoods and coffee shops. In our town halls and public squares, in the Harbour Castle conference room.

As Margaret Mead so famously noted:

“*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”*

AMO’s Healthy Democracy Project is a four-year, $1 million investment to help renew local democracy.

People need to understand what municipal governments do, what they *don’t*, and how decisions are made.

Life is fast paced and, let’s face it, most people don’t have a lot of time to think about it. That is until it hits them personally – like with a housing project in their backyard.

Caring and informed people need to know how they can get involved in community building.

Our goal is to foster greater civic participation, promote a greater sense of belonging and enable more respectful debate.

AMO launched this work by conducting Canada’s first ever in-depth study mapping the journey of municipal candidates. This was a deep dive into what helps and what hinders municipal electoral success, particularly for those with diverse backgrounds.

The study suggests 20 potential ideas and interventions that could help support these candidates.

When we encourage and support people with different backgrounds and experiences to participate in local government, when we come together and break bread together, like dinner with staff last night, we can start building trust and belonging.

People can cross ideological divides when we start to know one another as people. And when the community sees themselves reflected in their local government.

When we don’t agree, we have to be curious and willing to listen.

And we know it’s hard.

When we don’t see eye-to-eye, instead of asking, what’s wrong with you? Let’s ask, what happened to you?

We can learn to understand and respect other experiences and perspectives, even if they are not our own.

We will need to experiment with what works in our different communities – there’s no magic ingredient. It starts with us here today.

The ideas and insights we gather will help AMO build on the research to create solutions, tools and partnerships.

You will hear more about the study and potential tools over the course of the Forum.

And, you will be doing more than just listening.

Make no mistake, this is a hands-on event, we want to hear from you on how to direct our collective efforts to foster healthier democracy in Ontario. How can we collaborate and have greater impact?

We are delighted to have a number of municipal campaign schools here with us today.

These are volunteer-driven organizations that have been doing the heavy lifting on this work for a long time – at the grassroots level. Thank you for nurturing a passion for local government in your communities.

We are very pleased to partner with Toronto Metropolitan University and Apathy is Boring, a non-profit organization dedicated to youth engagement in government. What a terrific name for this group-Apathy is Boring-I love it.

Concurrent to our session here, young people are taking part in a group discussion on how to better engage our younger generations in local democracy and elections. This is building on AMO’s youth engagement work.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to you for coming out to this event. I’d like to leave you with a final quote by another formidable woman, Coretta Scott King – who said:

*“The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.”*

By being here today, you are demonstrating your care and compassion. And it reveals the potential we have in Ontario to make local governments stronger.

Forging a healthier democracy will be an ongoing collective effort.

People from many organizations, coming from many different sectors will **EACH** have to do their part to foster a sense of belonging, promote respect and nurture a healthy community.

Over the past two years, AMO has been working hard to build a coalition to help us do *our* part, and so we can work together to help you do *your* part,

Thank you and thank you for being here today. Thank you for trusting AMO, for taking on this work. As the President of AMO, I can tell you, the Board is committed to this work.

Now, it gives me great pleasure to introduce Jasvinder Sandhu, former Oakville Councillor, and Chair of the Healthy Democracy Project Advisory Group.