StandOurGround.ca NEWSLETTER

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Save our Communities from Urban Sprawl!

Low voter turnout is not the same as public indifference

This past week, **just 29.29 per cent** of eligible voters participated in Russell Township's municipal election, down from 31.3 per cent in 2022. The eleventh-hour withdrawal of one candidate, leaving four candidates for four council seats, may help explain this year's result. But it cannot explain why nearly seven in ten eligible voters also failed to exercise their voice four years ago.

Our newly elected Council could interpret these numbers as evidence that residents simply don't care. Or it could ask a more challenging question: **What if low participation reflects not indifference, but disengagement?**

There is an important difference. People can care deeply about their community while having little confidence that participating in municipal decisions will make a difference. In fact, the Township's own research suggests this is a legitimate concern.

In June 2025, the Township commissioned a report on public engagement prepared by Redbrick Communications. Among 528 survey respondents, 98 per cent agreed that having a voice in Township decisions was important, yet only 55 per cent were confident that public input informed those decisions. More than one-third identified a belief that their input would not matter or be valued as a reason for not participating.



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Redbrick's findings should give local government pause. **Democratic engagement does not begin and end at the ballot box.** Nor does meaningful engagement begin and end with a single public notice, meeting or three-question survey.

A weekday afternoon meeting may satisfy a consultation requirement, but it hardly accommodates working families. An information session where residents circulate among displays may provide useful information, but it rarely creates opportunities for community dialogue. And inviting comments on proposals that are already substantially developed leaves little room for residents to influence their direction.

Residents need accessible information, repeated notice of important decisions, opportunities that accommodate busy lives and a clear understanding of the choices before them. Engagement should be designed around residents' lives, not municipal convenience.

This speaks to a fundamental distinction between managing public input and nurturing public engagement. Informed by the consultant's report, the previous Council adopted its first **Public Engagement Policy**. It is a welcome step forward but remains largely a framework for managing participation: determining when to consult, selecting methods, coordinating activities and reporting results.

The new Public Engagement Policy creates the machinery for engagement. It does not, by itself, create a culture of engagement. **That requires a shift in leadership mindset, from satisfying minimal consultation requirements to actively cultivating public participation.**

Nurturing engagement requires something more. It means helping residents understand issues, welcoming different perspectives, exploring alternatives and demonstrating how public input influences decisions. It requires curiosity, openness and a willingness to sometimes change course. And when decisions are made, residents deserve to know not simply that their input was received, but how it was considered and why Council reached its conclusions.

Being listened to is not necessarily the same as being heard.

A rigorous commitment to transparency will be essential, too. When deciding whether to make public information readily available, Council might adopt a simple principle: When in doubt, put it out. Subject to legitimate and narrowly defined confidentiality requirements, openness and access to information should be the default. (Case in point: Try locating the Redbrick consultant's report on public engagement on the Township's website!)

Poor engagement has consequences beyond low voter turnout. When people feel excluded, dismissed or presented with predetermined decisions, frustration does not disappear. It can emerge as distrust, suspicion, conflict and increasingly adversarial relationships between residents and local government.

Worse, disengagement can become self-reinforcing. Residents stop participating because they doubt their voices matter.

Council interprets their absence as apathy. And the cycle continues.

The morning-after message to our Council-elect is this: **Low voter turnout does not necessarily mean residents don't care. It may mean we need more reasons to believe our participation matters.**

***StandOurGround**.ca welcomes your feedback, counterarguments, photographs, and written submissions for our Newsletter. Kindly inform us if you would like your Letter to the Editor to remain anonymous.*

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