

# Women making history

## ACROSS MANITOBA

There were plenty of new faces during the AMM Annual Convention in late November. With 48% of elected officials being brand-new to office, there was much to learn. But the statistic that caught the media's attention on election night on October 24 was the increase in the number of women elected. In total, 174 out of 879 of all elected officials are women, or 20% – an overall increase of 3% from 2014.

Even more significant is the news that more women were elected to lead councils over the next four years, too. Out of 137 municipalities, 21 women now serve as head-of-council, mayor, or reeve, as opposed to only 15 in 2014.

This increase was welcome news to RM of West St. Paul Mayor **Cheryl Christian**. Christian defeated incumbent Mayor **Bruce Henley** on election night and helped make history in West St. Paul. "We have three women on council now – we've never had more than one woman. I feel optimistic, positive that we're moving forward and changes are happening," she says.

To the question whether local councils need more women elected officials, or simply more qualified elected official, regardless of gender, Christian is firmly in the 'more women needed' camp: "It's about having an equal voice and having qualified women at the table. It's a combination; it's important that we have more women at the table, because we have a lot to offer. There are amazing, educated women that are great leaders, that deserve to be at the table; our communities benefit from it. Our communities are diverse, and we need councils that are diverse, too."

Christian became a recognizable face province-wide over the past couple of years thanks to her dedicated efforts to lead the charge against

bullying and harassment on municipal councils – a position that wasn't always easy. "There were many moments that it was challenging, absolutely," she admits. "Doing that makes it a little uncomfortable, going back to council when there are issues and you're front and centre on that. So it was a little intimidating, but we received emails and phone calls from councillors and CAOs and staff from municipalities from across Manitoba, saying 'I can't do it, but thank goodness that YOU are', so that was really gratifying and helped add some courage to keep fighting for changes."

And while she appreciates recently introduced amendments to *The Municipal Act*, which would require all members of council to undergo mandatory respectful conduct training, she says it doesn't go far enough – she still would like to see the establishment of an integrity commissioner. "We need that independent investigation process," she insists. "But I'm very hopeful."

As for her newly minted spot in the Mayor's chair, when asked if she's come down from her election-night high, her quick answer and laugh says it all: "No! It's exciting, our community is energized, our families are energized, the elected officials are such a collaborative group, so they're excited by the progress that we're making, too."

"I've had young kids come up and say 'I think I could be Mayor one day,' so it sets an example more than we realize."

Another trailblazer in the last election is City of Thompson Mayor **Colleen Smook**. As Mayor of the fourth largest city in the province, Smook was a one-term councillor before deciding to run for head of council. With former Mayor **Dennis Fenske** choosing not to run for re-election, Smook still had her work cut

out for her as she faced three opponents. She attributes her success with her history of community involvement and visibility in the community. "That's one thing about the north; you're taken at face value and what you bring to the position."



Mayor Cheryl Christian

### MUNICIPALITIES WITH WOMAN HEADS-OF-COUNCIL

- Boissevain-Morton
- East St. Paul
- Minnedosa
- Prairie View
- Ethelbert
- Russell-Binscarth
- St. Andrews
- St. Clements
- Teulon
- Thompson
- West St. Paul
- Armstrong
- Fisher
- Lakeshore
- Reynolds
- Rosser
- Springfield
- St. Laurent
- Two Borders
- Victoria Beach
- Woodlands

Smook has lived in Thompson for 47 years and describes herself as an open book. "We've had a bit of a challenge in our council over the past number of years, and I felt I could maybe be the one who could get them all working together and on the same page," she explains, referencing the often less than cooperative, and well-publicized, relationship amongst council members in the past. "We don't have to agree all the time, but we have exciting times happening in Thompson right now," she stresses. "There's good things coming to Thompson, despite layoffs at the mine."

The mine is Vale smelter and refinery, which sent lay-off notices to 169 employees earlier this year. At the same time, Smook says, businesses remain optimistic, and so is she. "I love Thompson, I believe in Thompson, and I felt it was a good time to make a difference."

Another challenge – which Smook sees as an opportunity – is a recent turnover in city staff. "We have great city staff – 9 of our 12 directors have been new over the last 18 months – so we've got young people in positions that were previously occupied by 30-35-year staff. They bring new ideas and are opening new doors so it's great."

Although it's too early to tell whether long-term unity will come to the City of Thompson Council (which is still short an 8th councillor as the result of a tie on election night), Smook already sees a difference around the council table. "I don't know how politically correct this is, but as a mother of seven and a grandmother of 23, I have experience in bringing people together and keeping everyone on the same page!"

As for being the first woman mayor of Thompson, the thought didn't cross her mind. "It wasn't until I walked into council chambers the night of the election, and everybody was going on about me being the first female mayor. It really didn't occur to me!" After nominating Councillor **Kathy Valentino** as Deputy Mayor, Smook says, the talk then turned to how Thompson now had TWO women leading council! "So without trying to make history we have, but we're both going to work hard to make it work," Smook says.

Mayor **Cheryl Kingdon-Chartier** only decided to run for Mayor of the Municipality of Russell-Binscarth a couple of months before the election. After serving as councillor for four years with the Town of Russell, then another four years for the amalgamated municipality of Russell Binscarth, she says, "I sort of

### JUNE LETKEMAN MAKES HISTORY...TWICE!

**June Letkeman**, the first – and only - woman elected to the Municipality of Rhineland council says, "It feels kind of special," before nonchalantly adding that it is actually her second time making history. In fact, she did the very same thing in the Village of Plum Coulee in 2006! "Then we amalgamated with the RM of Rhineland, and I decided to take a few years off," she adds.

Letkeman decided to run again this election, noting "it's a good fit for me. I'm retired, I have time, I love our community and municipality and if I can make a difference, I want to do that. I really love it."

How does it feel to be the only women on a council? "We're all equal", she says. "The men on our council are all awesome, they are very accepting of me, and they treat me just like a guy," she says with a laugh. "I feel very fortunate to be on that council."



Councillor June Letkeman



Mayor Colleen Smook

thought I wouldn't run for council. But you know, there are just catalysts that make a person make up their mind, and I ran into a few of those and thought 'you know what? I'm going to give it a shot.'"

Kingdon-Chartier doesn't elaborate on why she was considering throwing in the towel, or what those catalysts were, and has no interest in being negative. "I don't think anybody looks good making anybody look bad," she says. "I just decided that there were things I wanted to speak up about and thought, now is the time."

On election night, the people of Russell-Binscarth showed their support, giving Kingdon-Chartier a decisive 842 votes over incumbent **Len Derkach's** 283. "I was absolutely amazed – it's incredibly humbling," she says. "It humbles you to know that people think you can do this job. It gives you another reason to do the best you can do."

The first female Mayor of Russell downplays making history; she simply wants to do a good job for the people of her community. As for her leadership style, "I'm not a forceful leader; I firmly believe sometimes things get done more

effectively, and more pleasantly, when people aren't having something forced upon them," she explains. "I really feel that the head of council needs to lead people, but council is very much a team. We all need to keep strong communication lines at council level so we can keep those communication lines open with the public."

Kingdon-Chartier agrees with Christian and Smook in saying women do bring different qualities to the council table. "I feel all women, especially in a small municipality, understand it has to be run as a business, but women also bring the 'personal' back into it. That is, I feel, an easier thing to do for a woman. We have to keep moving forward and pushing for progress within our municipality, but we also have to treat our residents with the respect they deserve for being here day after day."

"And as naïve as it sounds, sometimes you just need to listen," she emphasizes. "I've told ratepayers 'you know, you and I can have a conversation, and I may not give you the answer you want, but at the end of the conversation let's just understand each other better.'" ▶



Mayor Cheryl Kingdon-Chartier