



Cowichan Leads – A Stronger Voice for Women

Groundbreaking study looks at women's involvement
in local government processes

Cowichan Leads Country in Study

The Cowichan region continues to play a leadership role in creating a stronger voice for women. Through the work of the Safer Futures Program of the Cowichan Women Against Violence Society, Cowichan has been at the forefront of groundbreaking research on designing safer communities for women.

Now Safer Futures has completed an important baseline study on women's participation in local government and decision-making processes.

Cowichan was one of only six communities across Canada to be selected to conduct this study, which is funded by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) and Status of Women Canada.

An Advisory Committee, comprised of representatives of local government and community organizations, provided direction to the research and overall study objectives.

The study, entitled "Increasing Women's Participation in Local

Government Processes", provides community leaders and citizens with a snapshot of women's experience and identifies clear goals/actions for increasing women's participation in governance.

Women's Participation Matters

The underlying message contained in the study is that women's participation matters. The study asserts that when women are involved in all aspects of decision-making, better decisions are made. In other words, the whole community benefits from a balanced, holistic approach to decision-making. "When everyone is involved in consultation, the best policy is developed and we don't miss the mark," says study author Terri Dame of Safer Futures.

"The study found that there are good things happening here in the Cowichan region, and that a huge potential for change exists. But it also clearly states there is still work to be done."

Jean Crowder
North Cowichan Councillor

By consistently including women's voices in consultation and decision-making, government makes more informed decisions, has better buy-in for those decisions and generally is more effective in meeting the needs of women and their families.

"Women's involvement is needed for good municipal decision-making," states Mike Coleman, Mayor of Duncan and Second Vice-President of the FCM.

Women represent an untapped potential, the study continues. It indicates that women bring unique perspectives to issues and have different interests, and that their energy and commitment is largely under-utilized in local governance processes. The study found that women are concerned about issues that don't always receive equal billing at the decision-making table, such as environmental protection, preservation of green-space and affordable daycare.

"Women have tremendous things to give – every time they are not involved something is being wasted," says Advisory Committee chair and North Cowichan Councillor Jean Crowder.

"The activities of municipal governments affect both women and men in ways that are fundamental to satisfying basic needs and quality of life," adds Jenny Farkas, Advisory Committee member and Duncan City Councillor.

The six-month Cowichan study used a combination of interviews, surveys and focus groups to gather its data. Over 400 women participated in the study, as well as municipal staff and community leaders.

"The study found that there are good things happening here in the Cowichan region," continues Crowder, "and that a huge potential for change exists. But it also clearly states there is still work to be done."

The Good News

The good news findings of the study show that overall the Cowichan region is moving in the right direction for women as elected officials. In some areas of the region, the representation of women is significantly higher than the national and provincial averages. Women make up 43% of North Cowichan and Ladysmith Councils versus 21% across the country and 28% in B.C.

Also on the positive side, the proportion of women on local government commissions and committees is improving in some parts of the region. Women make up 53% of

"Women's involvement is needed for good municipal decision-making."

Mike Coleman
Mayor, City of Duncan

Duncan committees and 51% of Ladysmith committees, compared to the national average of 36%. In addition, the active participation of women in this research study signifies a high level of interest in local government and decision-making. The response rate to the survey was 25%, and the overall number of women who participated in the Cowichan study was the highest among the six study areas across the country.

Still More Work to be Done

In spite of the good news, there is still a considerable amount of work to be done. For example, women who participated in the study said that local government is complicated and formal. They indicated a lack of information and awareness about how it works, as well as a lack of faith in its processes.

Women also felt that local government processes have not been developed to accommodate a wide range of needs or perspectives. In fact, some women are extremely under-represented in local decision-making. Nationally, less than 1% of visible minority women are involved on councils or committees. Here in the Cowichan - where 13% of our population is comprised of First Nations and visible minorities - no visible minority women hold elected positions or sit on government committees.

A large number of women in the Cowichan region experience significant barriers to participation. These barriers include lack of time and energy due to competing responsibilities around family and work; lack of childcare and transportation, and challenges around language and accessibility. Young women and women living in low-income situations have some of the lowest rates of participation. Until such barriers are addressed, significant increases in their involvement in local government and decision-making won't be realized.

A Huge Potential for Change

Fortunately, there exists a huge potential for change in the region.

"Women are extremely involved in this community," says Sandra Goth, Advisory Committee member and Executive Director of Cowichan Family Life, "but their involvement is largely concentrated in the non-profit and voluntary sectors and we are missing out on their knowledge and experience at the decision-making level." Goth continues, "We need to use our community capacity to its fullest. Women have a great deal to offer and want to be involved at the local decision-making level. More importantly, we need them to be involved."

The majority of women surveyed indicated a desire to make a positive contribution in their communities. The study found that they cared deeply and were greatly concerned about many facets of neighbourhood and community, including local development issues.

Community organizations also can play a key role in effecting change. "Women's organizations have a good sense of the pulse of the community, of women and children, which they can bring to the municipality for more proactive planning," says Advisory Committee member and Community Kitchens Co-ordinator Patti Delisle.

Measuring Success

One of the exciting aspects of the FCM study is that it offers a vision for what success looks like. Women will have achieved equitable participation in local government and decision-making processes when there is a significant increase in the number of women serving as elected officials, senior

managers and commission/committee members.

Success will also be realized when women are involved in the design and delivery of programs and services, the formation of municipal priorities includes women's perspectives, and government policy incorporates a gender lens.

Some other ways in which women's enhanced participation will be measured include greater voter turnout, increased involvement in consultation processes, increased involvement by visible minority and First Nations women, and women with disabilities.

Practical Next Steps

The study outlines a number of short and long-term steps that will help the Cowichan region move towards this vision of success.

In the short term, local government can explore methods to increase access to information and enhance information distribution processes, and can think about other ways to consult and how to broaden women's involvement in decision-making.

Community organizations can assist with this work by providing forums for women to learn about the electoral process, and the importance of their participation. These organizations can also ask local government to keep them informed about upcoming issues and to include them on committees.

Women need to know that they have something to contribute and a right to

be involved in local government matters.

They can start by paying attention to the issues being discussed in the local papers.

The Safer Futures project team has also identified a number of short-term actions they will take. These actions include making presentations to local councils and community organizations, and identifying possible funding sources for a second phase of the study.

Phase two would involve developing policy, tools and other mechanisms designed to increase information dissemination and enhance consultation processes. The project team also wants the next phase to include an annual report card to measure the region's progress.

The results of the Cowichan study will be published in a national report of the FCM this spring and be presented at their annual conference in May 2004. The project team will be contributing to a national tool kit designed to help local governments address women's participation in decision-making processes, and they will continue to work with the FCM National Steering Committee on this issue.

Over the long term, the project team aims to build on the baseline data contained in this Cowichan study, establish tracking systems and benchmarks, and work with local government and community organizations to achieve a stronger voice for women.