

# Vote for Public Health!



By Dr. Rosana Salvaterra,  
Medical Officer of Public  
Health, Peterborough

This autumn we have the colourful signs of municipal candidates reminding us that local governments

contribute to the health and wellbeing of our communities and that local candidates, once elected, will become agents for change on a number of public health issues. While all local boards of health follow the provincial mandate set out for them under the Ontario Public Health Standards, municipal councils play a major role in setting priorities that shape the public health of our community. And they are one of our most powerful partners. Whether it is about ensuring that pedestrians have safe sidewalks; stepping in to fund important programs for priority populations like school children or people in need of shelter and housing; or working with the business community to ensure the urban environment has plenty of green space, our elected municipal leaders are important local advocates.

Let's look at commercial tobacco smoking and second-hand smoke exposures as an example. In the 2000s, it was municipal councils across this province that went above and beyond the limited provincial legislation to provide their communities with more smoke-free spaces. And the city of Peterborough led the way, passing bylaws in 2009 and 2010 that banned smoking and chew tobacco from city parks and hospital grounds. This proactive health-protecting stance has persisted, with bylaws that have banned smoking in sports fields, street festivals, playgrounds, wading pools, and beaches both in the city and in townships like Selwyn and Cavan Monaghan. In July 2018 the City of Peterborough amended its smoke-free bylaws to prohibit vaping that exceeded the limits set out in the Smoke Free Ontario Act.

And with the imminent legalization of cannabis just around the corner, once again our city, township and county councils will have an opportunity to make decisions about the sale and use of this newly legalized psychoactive substance that will shape the future environments in which we live, work and play.

Municipal councils have a keen understanding of local needs, and are well positioned to work with their local public health partners to develop and invest in strategies that can make a real difference to our quality of life.

Active communities, a clean environment, and ensuring health for all people regardless of background or income level are key considerations for municipal decision-making. Peterborough Public Health has its finger on the pulse of local issues affecting the health of our community, and has created an easy election primer to help voters understand how municipal governments can play a positive role. It's called "Let's Make Public Health a Priority" and it is available in hard copy and on our website [www.peterborough-publichealth.ca](http://www.peterborough-publichealth.ca) under the link for "Public Health and the Municipal Election". This primer highlights several key issues for our area: opioids, housing, poverty, oral health, food security, healthy natural environments, community design, and other substances – alcohol, tobacco and cannabis. For each topic, we offer evidence-based policies that municipal councils can adopt to respond to these challenges. On our website we have also posted several reports that contain the scientific data used to understand our local public health needs. We encourage voters to use this information in their discussions with candidates and in making their decisions for the upcoming election.

Over the summer, Peterborough Public Health reached out to all candidates running for city and township councils to take part in a series of Conversation Cafés. We heard from city candidates that they were most concerned about housing, harm reduction for people who use opioids, urban design and poverty. Candidates running in the townships told us that safe drinking water, climate change, housing, and food security were top on their list of important issues. These future decision-makers were also introduced to the provincial and municipal roles governing public health, and to our local team of public health professionals who are there to support councils in developing effective, evidence-based policies. We shared the same public health reports made available to voters on our website, as well as the recommendations Peterborough Public Health was asked to develop in response to the revised Official Plans for both the City and County of Peterborough. They were an impressive group!

All of us at Peterborough Public Health look forward to the working with the new councils and our new board of health that will be recast in January 2019 following the results of the municipal election. These are indeed exciting times!

