

## **Neighbourhood Constituency Wards: Information and Comments**

The District of Lake Country was incorporated in 1995, with a neighbourhood constituency (ward) arrangement as a defining feature. The ward system allows residents to vote for a councillor in the neighbourhood districts of Winfield, Okanagan Centre, Carr's Landing and Oyama. Subsequent to incorporation residents voted in a referendum in 1998 in favour of retaining the ward system.<sup>1</sup> Currently, four councillors are elected from constituencies, and two councillors and the mayor are elected at-large. Lake Country is the only municipality in BC with a ward system.

After the 2008 municipal election, concerns were raised regarding the ward system. Council has asked District staff to examine the system and solicit citizen input on the issue.



### **Advantages of the ward system**

- Stronger representation and accountability for residents of each constituency and different groups within the community;
- Increased visibility and availability of councillors to their constituents;
- Councillors having greater familiarity with neighbourhood issues; and
- Promoting the character of four distinct neighbourhoods in the District.

In general, a ward system:

- Encourages greater voter participation because of tailored campaign messages and more face-to-face interaction
  - This has not occurred in Lake Country, in part due to the small number of candidates
- Results in less expensive election campaign for candidates, which can lead to a greater diversity of candidates
  - This is not the case in Lake Country as a ward campaign in the municipality generally incurs similar costs as an at-large campaign

### **Disadvantages of the ward system**

- Motivation for councillors to focus on small localized issues and make decisions that may not benefit entire community;
- Voters can only vote for part of the council, though the entire council makes decision for the constituency and larger municipality;
- Higher election costs due to multiple ballot preparation, public notifications, staffing, and staff training costs; and
- Potential for competition between wards for resource allocation and development projects.
  - For the most part this competition has not been evident in Lake Country.

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<sup>1</sup> The referendum was held on October 17, 1998. Of the 521 voters, 85% voted yes in response to "Are you in favour of retaining the neighbourhood constituency system?"

## **Challenges of the ward system in Lake Country**

Since the ward system was established in Lake Country in 1995 the municipality has changed and the system is facing new challenges. These challenges include:

- Different population levels in each ward
  - Lake Country has a population of approximately 10,600 over an area of 122 square kilometres. The population of the four wards varies because they were established based on geographic areas rather than on population. Over 52% of the municipality's population lives in the neighbourhood constituency of Winfield, while Okanagan Centre has 20.8% of the population, Oyama has 16.9%, and Carr's Landing has 6.1%.
- Low candidate participation
  - In the 2005 election, 3 of 4 ward councillors won by acclamation.
  - In the 2008 election only one position was contested.
  - Many of the ward candidates are well-known within their community and there may be a perception that candidates are predetermined by the residents prior to an election.
  - An at-large election system may encourage more candidates to run due to a larger playing field.
- Low voter turnout
  - In the 2008 election the voter turnout was 19%.
  - The numerous acclamations may have discouraged residents from voting and diminished public interest in local government.
- Changing geographical regional identity
  - When Lake Country was incorporated neighbourhood identities were very important; over time new residents have moved to the District and may not have the same neighbourhood identities.
  - One indication of the changing geographical regional identity is the numerous inquiries received at the last election asking "What ward do I live in?"

## **What is your view?**

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