

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT RECAPPED 'IN A NUTSHELL'

The concept of Civic Engagement is defined as “citizens acquiring the will, and subsequently taking the necessary steps, to become involved in society by voting in elections and involving themselves with charitable, volunteer, and other community service organizations that address such important community matters as health and education”. One key “necessary step” is to ensure that more Aboriginal community members have at least a basic understanding of government, and the importance of good political support.

Ultimately, the Aboriginal community must achieve some consensus as to what our social and political civic engagement priorities should be through serious internal thought and discussion, so that we can concentrate our efforts on obtaining the funds and developing the initiatives that will best meet community expectations and needs. This also includes, of course, thought and discussion on how we can achieve self-governance in the City of Toronto.

PROJECT AND ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This pamphlet is one of a series of four produced by the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC) through a larger initiative titled the Aboriginal Civic Literacy Initiative. The project aims to increase Aboriginal community members’ ability and desire to pursue effective civic engagement with all levels of government, in ways that will result in increased governmental attention and resources for urban Aboriginal community needs and aspirations. **Project funding provided by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) through its Aboriginal Urban Strategy is gratefully acknowledged.**

The Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council is a not-for-profit policy and research organization that addresses social determinants to improve and enhance the social, economic and cultural base of Aboriginal peoples in the City of Toronto (for more information, please visit www.tassc.ca on-line or contact a representative of the organization by phone at 647-748-6100 or by e-mail at info@tassc.ca).

ABORIGINAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: OUR MOTIVATIONS AND ISSUES

Pamphlet 3 in a Series of 4
Aboriginal Civic Literacy Pamphlets



Photo: Jorge Antonio Vallejos

WE HAVE UNIQUE REASONS TO BE PROUD OF TORONTO

The Toronto area has long been a place of social gathering and sustenance for Aboriginal people. What's more, the Toronto Aboriginal Research Project (TARP) Report estimates that there are 70,000 of us in the city, which means that we're the largest Aboriginal community in Ontario. More importantly, our rich heritages adds greatly to the cultural mosaic and deserve to be shared with others and passed on to future generations, as shown by such things as talking circles, diversion programs, powwows, and even the American form of government (which was inspired, in part, by the Iroquois Confederacy).

So we should take heed of the old legal maxim, "Stand on your rights or lose them". In other words, if Aboriginal people don't vote, volunteer, and engage in activism more as a community we may not always have as much cause to be proud. However, we first have to reach some sort consensus as to what exactly we want to achieve through increased civic engagement (this should also include thought and discussion as to how we can practice self-governance in the City of Toronto).

WE'RE CULTURALLY INCLINED TO CARE AND CIVICALLY ENGAGE

Culturally speaking, Aboriginal people are inclined to civically engage because we believe that everyone matters, is needed and valued, and has a vital role to play in the world. This is an obligation as much as it is a gift, as it means that we're expected to have concern for the world in general and to care about and contribute to the good of our own community. Concern for Mother Earth is part and parcel to this, too, of course.

We also value Elders' and women's roles in and contributions to the community, the welfare and potential of our children and youth, and the lessons, insights, and positive energy that our 2-spirited brothers and sisters bring to us (the health and wellness of our men is equally important to us, too, it almost goes without saying). Indeed, we've always known that everyone deserves the fullest protection and representation of their interests possible.

THERE ARE MANY SOCIAL ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

Aboriginal people tend to prefer that there not be 'have' and 'have-nots' in society, so we may want to civically engage more to ensure that everyone enjoys at least the same minimum level of social and economic prosperity—our friends and neighbours included. After all, it's hard to gain an even footing with others if you're especially disadvantaged to begin with. So, some of the things we might want to push for in particular are more (and better) jobs, and better education and health care/promotion.

Justice issues tend to be a concern for us, too. In particular, we must ensure that Aboriginal women receive the fullest protection possible from the justice system.



Photo: Mark Blinich/The Canadian Press