

Why isn't North Shore's Iranian-Canadian community more involved in municipal politics?



By North Shore Outlook

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How engaged are Iranian-Canadians in municipal politics on the North Shore?

The question came up at a recent West Vancouver council meeting after a presentation about the annual Norouz celebration at Ambleside.

After discussing the Persian New Year event that draws thousands every March, one councillor said he would like more Iranian-Canadians to attend council meetings. Noticing relatively few at previous meetings, he wanted to make sure their needs were being addressed.

So this begs the question, how involved is the Iranian-Canadian community in local government decisions that affect North and West Vancouver?

"It takes time," said Mehrdad Rahbar, a member of the Iranian-Canadian Steering Committee who ran for a West Van councillor position in 2005. "There is a big population, but [many] are not involved in politics."

The main reason Rahbar ran for council was to create interest in municipal politics.

Iranians are one of the most educated immigrants groups, he said, so picking up Canadian politics would come easily to them. But at the same time, he added, many don't trust the government because they come from a dictatorship, which didn't need their votes.

MP John Weston, who is the government liaison to the Persian and Iranian community, said many people who grew up in Canada cannot imagine some of the reasons why Iranian-Canadians hesitate to go to public events.

For instance, when Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian lawyer who won a Nobel Peace Prize for pioneering efforts to support democracy and human rights, visited West Vancouver, Weston was surprised by the number of people who said they would like to meet her but feared their attendance would be reported back to Iran's regime.

"For people who would naturally want to be involved in democratic expressions, they may be adverse to doing so for reasons most Canadians would not imagine," Weston said, adding the majority of Iranian-Canadians came to Canada after Iran's 1979 revolution, a time of protest and violence.

In addition, new Canadians, including those from Iran, have to get settled before they take part in municipal politics, he noted, adding learning English can also take time.

Trying to encourage more involvement in municipal politics, the [Civic Association of Iranian-Canadians](#), commonly known as Civic IC, is a non-partisan group that is organizing Iranian-Canadians into a more civically active community. The organization began in 2008 after its founders noticed participation in elections needed to be improved.

"If you look back two years ago, there are more people showing up today," said Rahbar, who is involved with Civic IC.

Getting together can be a challenge because the organization is volunteer run, he said, adding that being provided with a room by one of the North Shore's municipalities would help the group meet regularly.

"They realize this is their home... Now, through education, I think they will start participating [in politics] more," said Rahbar.

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