

Democracy Cafe aims to get out the vote

Community workshops combat election season apathy

Christine Lyon / North Shore News

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Voter turnout in the last federal election was a dismal 61 per cent, one of the lowest turnouts in Canadian history.

To combat election season apathy, ignorance and general confusion, North Shore Community Resources is collaborating with a number of local agencies to host the Democracy Cafe, a series of free public workshops that aim to engage citizens in politics in the runup to the next federal vote on Oct. 19. The cafes will run Sept. 19 to Oct. 8 at five locations across the North Shore: North Vancouver City Library, Lynn Valley Library, Capilano Library, Parkgate Community Centre and West Vancouver Memorial Library.

"It's a pretty unique event. It's not an all-candidates meeting, it's not partisan in any way. In fact, we're really emphasizing the non-partisan aspect of it," says Murray Mollard, executive director of North Shore Community Resources.

There are three different workshop themes and residents can attend one, two, or all of the two-hour sessions. The first will focus on basic civic literacy; the second will address democratic values and experiences; and the third will deal with voter apathy and how to overcome it.

Mollard took over the executive director role in June, replacing Li Boesen, who retired. A lawyer by training, Mollard has spent most of his professional career in the non-profit world and is the author of *The Citizenship Handbook: A Guide to Democratic Rights and Responsibilities for Canadians*. The Democracy Cafe, he says, is a response to the "democratic deficit" created by declining voter turnout figures in Canada.

<https://bccla.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/2008-BCCLA-Report-Citizenship-Handbook.pdf>

"This seeks to, in a small way, address that deficit by providing a forum for people to come and learn."

Political experts will facilitate the workshops, but attendees are encouraged to participate in dialogue and share their own knowledge and experiences. They are also invited to join an online conversation by using the hashtag #NSDemocracyCafe.

Mollard envisions the Democracy Cafe as a place where people of all ages and backgrounds, from youth to seniors and from newcomers to longtime Canadians, can gather and learn.

"Being engaged in public life means you're meeting people, you're engaging with people, you're talking with your neighbours," he says.

If all goes well, the Democracy Cafe could become a regular event on the North Shore.

"If this works and people are interested, we could see doing something like this in the future at the provincial and municipal levels as well." Registration is encouraged but not required. Call North Shore Community Resources at 604-985-7138 or visit the individual venue websites for more information.

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