

We want to find out why you don't vote

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Did you vote in the last municipal election? With 2010 voter turnout in York Region ranging from a low of 28.8 per cent in Richmond Hill to a high of 49.9 per cent in King Township, chances are, you didn't.

Odds are you didn't cast a ballot in the municipal election prior to that either.

Don't beat yourself up. What's done is done, but the trend of poor voter participation at the municipal level needs to change for 2014.

Enter the York Region Media Group's Big 5-0 Project, which has set the ambitious goal of boosting voter turnout in the areas we cover up to 50 per cent through an ongoing series that details what municipal government is and how it impacts you on a daily basis.

We'll also be working toward our target via our various Community Links panels and through the use of council report cards.

It's a tall order, but it really shouldn't be.

After all, we rely on the services provided by municipal government every day, but often take them for granted.

Staff from your local municipality maintains residential streets and sidewalks and helps to keep our parks and other public spaces neat and tidy, while the regional level of government is tasked with collecting your garbage and recycling, running the transit service and taking care of regional roads, such as Yonge Street, amongst other responsibilities.

Both levels are also charged with drafting budgets for the year and establishing a property tax rate with which to fund them.

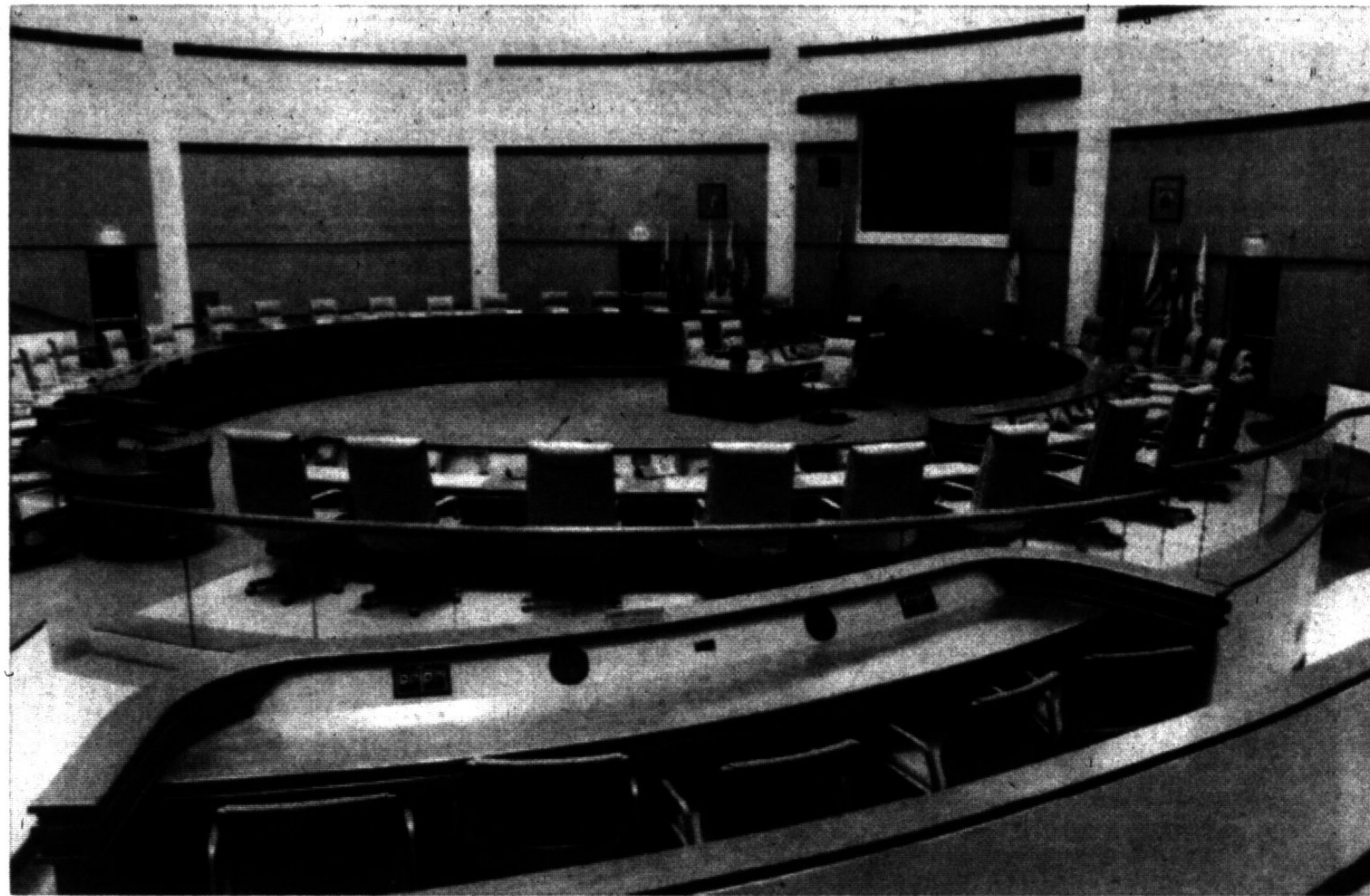
Given the financial and quality-of-life impacts, you would expect voter turnout to be much higher.

So why isn't it?

Poor voter participation rates at the municipal level can be owed to a number of factors, York University political science professor Robert MacDermid explained.

For starters, many people simply don't follow their municipal council enough to really get interested or care about its decisions, he said, adding another likely culprit is the pace at which our modern always-connected society moves.

People are busy with work, commuting and family commitments, he said. When you add all of those things together, there's not a lot of time left for politics.



Naturally, all of that changes for people when an issue comes along that directly affects them or their neighbourhood, he said, adding affluent areas also tend to be more active.

In an effort to counter the statistics, municipalities across the province have tried a variety of different ways to bring more people out on election day, but most have met with limited success, Mr. MacDermid said.

Ajax, for example, tried several means to encourage more participation on the part of the electorate, up to and including a hometown celebrity-studded video on YouTube, but saw its voter turnout rise just 2 per cent to 25.4 per cent in 2010 for the effort, he said.

Closer to home, Markham tried online voting and mail-in ballots during the last election, but actually saw voter turnout decrease slightly.

The reality is, more ways to vote doesn't always equate to more voters, Mr. MacDermid said.

"When municipalities do things like Internet voting, people who always would have voted

anyway tend to use them," he said. "It doesn't usually attract new people."

Another interesting piece of the puzzle is voter turnouts tend to be somewhat higher in rural municipalities compared to urban ones.

It's difficult to say for sure why that is, Mr. MacDermid said, but one reason may be smaller communities just tend to be more focused on local issues.

Larger municipalities often have significant growth in their recent past, which brings an influx of new residents who may not yet be familiar with the political landscape in their new homes, he said.

So how do we fix it?

Experts have suggested many ways to increase engagement, from introducing political parties, to give voters a better sense of where candidates stand and compulsory voting to changing the format of the ballot.

For Mr. MacDermid, one of the easiest fixes is to simply move municipal election day in Ontario from a Tuesday to a Saturday to make it easier for people to find

the time to vote.

Another solution, he suggested, is to ensure prospective voters are informed of the upcoming election and when and where they can cast a ballot. Unlike the provincial and federal voter registries, municipal lists rely on data from the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) and the information can be badly out of date, he said, especially when it comes to tenants.

The lists from MPAC aren't always perfect, Richmond Hill projects and support services manager Stephen O'Brien said, but noted people also have a responsibility to ensure their records are kept up to date.

It's one of the reasons Richmond Hill intends to make extensive use of social media and other tools to let people know the value of ensuring their information is correct and that municipal voting day is Oct. 27, 2014, he said, adding he suspects other towns and cities across the province will do the same.

As with some of its neighbours, Richmond Hill explored the idea of online voting, but eventually decided against it.

In any event, Mr. O'Brien said he ultimately believes it will be the issues of the day or the candidates themselves that will determine if people vote en masse.

"I would argue that elections and voter turnouts are tied to issues and candidates," he said. "We can set when people vote,

2010 VOTER TURNOUT

- ▶ Aurora: 38.5 per cent (up from 38 per cent in 2006)
- ▶ Bradford West Gwillimbury: 39 per cent (about the same in 2006)
- ▶ East Gwillimbury: 37.44 per cent (up from 36.39 per cent in 2006)
- ▶ Georgina: 35 per cent (unchanged from 2006)
- ▶ King: 49.9 per cent (up slightly from 49.84 per cent in 2006)
- ▶ Markham: 35.5 per cent (down from 37.6 per cent in 2006)
- ▶ Newmarket: 32.6 per cent (down from 35 per cent in 2006)
- ▶ Richmond Hill: 28.8 per cent (up from 25.6 per cent in 2006)
- ▶ Vaughan: 40.5 per cent (up from 38 per cent in 2006)
- ▶ Whitchurch-Stouffville: 45 per cent (unchanged from 2006)

▶ To find out more or to share your thoughts on this or any other local issue, e-mail Sun-Tribune editor Jim Mason at jmason@yrmg.com

where people vote and how people vote, but we can't dictate why."

The why is indeed a difficult query.

The municipal election race in Vaughan saw then-mayor Linda Jackson and other incumbents replaced, but even that dramatic turn of events translated to just a 2.5-per-cent increase in the voter turnout. Another contentious race that ended in the defeat of incumbents, Aurora, saw a mere 0.5-per-cent uptake in the number of ballots cast.

Still, politicians would be unwise to assume low turnouts in their communities equate to a content populace, Mr. MacDermid said.

The Big 5-0 hopes to change that. If you share that ideal, you're welcome to join one of our Community Links panels.