

Op-Ed From Valerie Payn

Last August, Mayor Savage took to this newspaper to make his case for why immigrants with permanent resident status should be allowed to vote in Halifax's municipal elections. We fully support the Mayor's initiative and believe that this would be a positive step forward for Halifax. His argument was simple: permanent residents have immigrated to Canada, they can own property, and they work and pay taxes like everyone else. Why should they not have a say in how their city is run?

Permanent residents can vote in jurisdictions around the world, but it is a new concept for Canadian cities. Change, however, is brewing. Last year, the City of Toronto called on the Government of Ontario to extend the franchise to permanent residents; and the City of Saint John recently asked their provincial government to do the same. Yet, to date, no province has been willing to be the first mover.

Regional Council will debate the Mayor's request sometime over the next few months and we are asking them to do the right thing and endorse it. Additionally, our provincial leaders will need to show leadership and move quickly to make the necessary legislative changes. We see no good reason why this cannot be in place in time for Halifax's next municipal election in 2016.

The One Nova Scotia Report challenged our province to become more inclusive and welcoming to newcomers. Immigrants know what Halifax needs to do become a more attractive place, and by giving them the ability to vote we are making sure that their voices are heard.

The Halifax Chamber of Commerce strongly believes that Nova Scotia needs more immigrants to reach our potential as a province. That is why we made promoting immigration a major goal of our 2013-2018 Strategic Plan. We have spoken to many of our members on this issue and they give their full support to making our permanent residents full participants in our community.

In other cities, opponents have argued that letting people vote before they become citizens dilutes the value of citizenship. While voting is certainly a major benefit to citizenship, it is far from the only one. The ability to pass your citizenship on to your children, to travel freely abroad, and to never face the risk of deportation are all major benefits of citizenship. In fact, we believe that giving permanent residents the vote will only strengthen their connection to Halifax and to Canada.

Mayor Savage's proposal might also help our anemic levels of voter turnout in Halifax. In the last election, only 37% of eligible voters cast their ballots. Letting permanent residents vote would inject some much needed energy into elections that are all too often defined by apathy and indifference.

We trust that, when given the chance, our municipal and provincial leaders will do the right thing and let permanent residents have a say in municipal elections. A person with a vote is a person with a voice, and if we want to build a more inclusive city we need to show that we are willing to listen to those new voices.