



City of Hamilton

PLANNING COMMITTEE ADDENDUM

Meeting #: 21-016
Date: October 19, 2021
Time: 9:30 a.m.
Location: Due to the COVID-19 and the Closure of City Hall (CC)

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Lisa Kelsey, Legislative Coordinator (905) 546-2424 ext. 4605

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To the City Clerk and members of the City of Hamilton's Planning Committee,

I am writing regarding an agenda item [profiled in the *Hamilton Mountain News*](#) from an official with the Hamilton Mountain Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario riding association. This agenda item is regarding a proposed ban on election signs.

Local media has reported that the proposed ban is connected to our ongoing climate crisis. Despite this, much of the evidence presented is anecdotal. Basing a policy on the personal experience of a small group of those involved in Hamilton's politics risks ignoring the voices those who would be most impacted by such a ban.

As a researcher focusing on urban political geography, I have studied the impact of election lawn signs, with an emphasis of those used by candidates for municipal office. Lawn signs are crucial tools for local candidates, particularly because scholars of municipal politics in Canada acknowledge that local elections are considered "**low information events**". This means that voters have far less information regarding their municipal candidates than those who run in federal or provincial contests. Thanks to the absence of formal political party involvement and a lack of widespread awareness of the functions of local government, voters are presented with more scattered information, which can cause disengagement and apathy. Similarly, research has found this to be a cause for the few electors who do bother to vote in a municipal race focusing on a candidate's identity, incumbency status, *or even the position of their name on the ballot*, rather than their policies (see: Brockington, 2003; Holman & Lay, 2021; Matson & Fine, 2006; McGregor, Moore, Jackson, Bird, & Stephenson, 2017).

Promotional material used during election campaigns has an identifiable and important impact on a candidate's success. Candidates, particularly those who are challengers or are running in open seats, need to promote their names widely and in an inexpensive way. Lawn signs are an effective way of doing this. While campaign managers, candidates, and other individuals involved in politics may rest on the old axiom "signs don't vote", *they do impact voters* and aid in increasing the electorate's awareness of an election.

Researchers in the United States conducted a series of randomized field experiments using election lawn signs in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. These experiments used a variety of signs for a number of different elections in a range of locations. The findings of these experiments noted that election signs have "**reliable persuasion effects** that tend to be small in magnitude," (Green et al., 2016, p. 149). Other research found similar modest effects of signs for candidates, but noted that a campaign lawn sign can be an **important way for voters to remain engaged** with the electoral process, with a majority (70.3%) of those who placed signs on their lawns working to engage an average of 25 of their friends and neighbours regarding the election (Talbot, 1975). Contemporary scholarship reinforces the idea that campaign lawn signs are a way for engaged residents to connect with elections in their community (Lenoir, 2021). Though their impact is small, the point remains that **election lawn signs have a notable impact on elections**. Used in conjunction with other traditional campaign tactics (canvassing, literature drops, direct voter outreach, etc.), they can aid new candidates in reaching eligible voters.

As many members of the City of Hamilton's Planning Committee well know, running election campaigns is difficult. Local campaigns are particularly challenging for members of historically-marginalized communities. For many – **women, members of the queer community,**

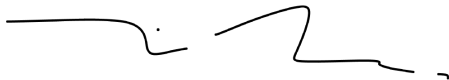
BIPOC candidates and candidates with differing abilities particularly – the hurdles placed before them while seeking elected office are numerous and daunting. Banning election lawn signs, which are a proven and time-honoured campaign tool, would simply add *another hurdle* to an already challenging task for many.

The anecdotal evidence in support of a ban is shallow at best. Claims that lawn signs are immediately disposed of after elections are not supported by fact. Indeed, for every story of a campaign bringing thousands of signs to a landfill, there will be an equally compelling story of campaign workers seeking out storage locations to ensure signs are reused for future elections. Further claims that bylaw complaints regarding signs should be a reason to outlaw them could equally be applied to anything from fireworks and dogs to cars and front lawns. Regarding these claims, it is important to remember that an individual's personal experience does not constitute a general trend or fact.

I stress this point: resting on anecdotal evidence to justify a ban on election lawn signs risks ignoring the voices those who would be most impacted by such a ban. I implore the City of Hamilton's Planning Committee to reject the calls for an election lawn sign ban or, at the very least, engage in a study of the impacts of lawn signs by working collaboratively with researchers and with candidates in the upcoming provincial and municipal elections to collect quantitative and qualitative data that can be employed in a sound manner to make a decision that works for everyone.

Elections are challenging, particularly for new candidates and those from historically-marginalized communities. Banning election lawn signs is needlessly erecting another barrier to entry for those who, like yourselves, are passionate enough about our community to put their names forward for elected office. I encourage the members of the Planning Committee to reject calls to ban the proven, effective campaign tool that is the election lawn sign.

Thank you,



Chris Erl, B.A. (Hon.), M.A., M.Pl.
 Doctoral candidate, Urban Political Geography – McGill University
 Ward 1 Resident

Citations:

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- Green, D. P., Krasno, J. S., Coppock, A., Farrer, B. D., Lenoir, B., & Zingher, J. N. (2016). The effects of lawn signs on vote outcomes: Results from four randomized field experiments. *Electoral Studies*, 41, 143-150.
- Holman, M. R., & Lay, J. C. (2021). Are You Picking Up What I Am Laying Down? Ideology in Low-Information Elections. *Urban Affairs Review*, 57(2), 315-341.
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- Matson, M., & Fine, T. S. (2006). Gender, ethnicity, and ballot information: Ballot cues in low-information elections. *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, 6(1), 49-72.
- McGregor, R. M., Moore, A., Jackson, S., Bird, K., & Stephenson, L. B. (2017). Why so Few Women and Minorities in Local Politics?: Incumbency and Affinity Voting in Low Information Elections. *Representation*, 53(2), 135-152.
- Talbot, M. R. (1975). *The impact of political campaign lawn signs*. (Master of Arts). UC Sacramento, Sacramento. Retrieved from <http://dspace.calstate.edu/handle/10211.3/193573>