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Date 11.11.2006	Circ. 14900 Page 3	1 / 1

Learning more about citizens' assembly

Thompson attending session on provincial election reform

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At 54 Jean Thompson is taking a crash course in how governments are elected

As a member of The Ontario Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform, the Chatham woman is seeking to determine if reforms are needed in how we elect our provincial government.

The next session of her crash course occurs this weekend, as she spends Saturday and Sunday listening to experts on electoral reform.

"It's been very interesting, very educational," Thompson said in an interview Friday, before leaving for Toronto.

"We are not used to other systems and we think in terms of first past the post . . . the system we presently use," she said.

Thompson explained that system works on the premise that the person with the most votes wins.

"But it doesn't always represent everyone who has put in a vote," she said.

Thompson said there are other electoral systems "that do represent all types of votes."

Would that be better for Ontarians? Thompson can't answer that yet, as she admits she's still learning about the process and the options available.

Thompson is one of 100 Ontarians on the citizens assembly.

Thompson, a stay-at home wife and mother of two university-aged children, said none of the members have been heavily involved in politics.

"We're representing basically Ontario . . . it's a fair representation of the populace for age, race and gender," she added.

While the citizens assembly is exploring the issue, they'll also be seeking input from Ontarians.

Public consultation meetings will be held across the province from November until the end of January.

One meeting in Windsor will be held on Jan. 9 at the YMCA at 500 Victoria Ave. That same night, a London meeting will be held at N'Amerind Friendship Centre at 260 Colborne St. Both meetings run from 7 to 10 p.m.

Another meeting is slated to be held in London on Jan. 11 with a location yet to be determined.

While people are invited to make presentations about their views on electoral reform, those just interested in learning more are also invited to participate in the discussion.

Barry Koen-Butt, a spokesman for the Ontario Citizens' Assembly Secretariat, said individuals looking to participate in the public meetings don't have to know much about the electoral reform.

"We want to know what they're views are, what they're interested in, what they like and don't like," he said in a telephone interview from

Toronto.

Anyone wanting to make a presentation at one of the public meetings should call 1-866-317-3208 or email info@citizensassembly.gov.on.ca

As area residents prepare to vote in Monday's municipal election, Thompson said, "what I find amazing

is our lack of participating in voting.

"We have a free society where we're allowed to vote and the voting has declined over the last several years."

Thompson doesn't miss an opportunity to cast her ballot.

"Not that I'm super into politics. As a citizen, I want to be represented and if I want to be represented, I have to vote," she said.

She said participating in an election is an individual's opportunity to ensure their voice is heard.

And she wishes more people felt that way.

"We're far too complacent," she said, as a society. She said voter participation will also be addressed as part of the electoral reform.

Information on the citizens assembly is available at the Chatham-Kent Public Library and municipal service centres, as well as online at www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca

Koen-Butt said the assembly's recommendations will go the government by May 15 and if reforms are recommended, Ontarians will have the opportunity to vote on it in a referendum in the next provincial election.

