

Assembly to change the face of politics

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Residents of Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke will have a voice in identifying potential changes to the way provincial members of parliament are elected.

As part of Premier Dalton McGuinty's agenda to strengthen the democratic process in Ontario, each riding in the province will have a representative on the Citizens' Assembly of Electoral Reform. Once formed, the assembly will have until mid-2007 to come back to the government with its recommendations. If the assembly recommends changes to the current first-past-the-post electoral system, a provincial referendum will be held to decide the issue.

Because it would be the first referendum in Ontario, legislation to govern how a referendum would be run is being drafted.

If the assembly recommends change, it would mark the first time the province's voting system has changed in 150 years, noted Barry Koen-Butt of the Citizens' Assembly Secretariat.

"This could change the face of politics in the province forever," he added. "It will be a made-in-Ontario solution."

The Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke delegate to sit on the citizens' assembly will be chosen June 17 during a meeting in Ottawa. It was

predetermined that the local representative will be a woman. Eleven women from the area will attend the meeting to learn more about the role of the assembly and at the end of the presentation will decide whether to let their names stand for the position. Elections Ontario will randomly draw one name, and two alternates.

The 103-person assembly will be comprised of 52 females and 51 males, with at least one person a self-identified Aboriginal. To date, 80 people have been chosen. All of the positions must be filled by July 14.

Mr. Koen-Butt believes the group represents a good cross-section of the residents of the province of Ontario. The members of the assembly range from a high school student to a retired law professor, and many professions in between, as well as a diverse mix of ethnic backgrounds.

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After all of the representatives are selected, the citizens' assembly will gather in Toronto for six weekends between September and November 2006. The members will learn everything they need to know about electoral reform before the consultation phase takes place from November 2006 to February 2007.

During the consultation process,

the members of the assembly will return to their own electoral districts, host meetings and gather input from the public. Mr. Koen-Butt expects between 2,000 and 5,000 submissions will be received from citizens across the province.

"Through this consultation process, everyone will have an opportunity to have their say," he added.

Once all of the input is gathered and summarized, the assembly will return to Toronto for six weekends to review the information and determine what it will recommend to the government.

The selection meetings are hosted by Elections Ontario. In March it opened a call centre to allow electors to confirm, update and add their names to the permanent register of electors. After two weeks, letters were mailed to 124,000 electors asking if they would participate in the selection process. From the 12,000 positive responses, 1,242 electors were invited to attend one of 29 meetings being held in 17 cities across Ontario.

For more information visit: www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca.

