



January 22, 2023

To: Oakville Town Council

Re: January 30, 2022, Council Meeting

Agenda Item 9.2: Notice of Motion: Election Sign Regulations

The Joshua Creek Residents Association supports the use of elections signs on public property during the period of election at any level of government. We do not support banning election signs on public roadways, and we find it troubling that this motion has come forward without any public consultation.

We recognize that during the municipal election, wards with large numbers of candidates had many election signs put up in their neighbourhood. In every Oakville Ward there are candidates for two Councillor positions, Mayor, Regional Chair, and school trustees. So, in Oakville's municipal elections even with only two candidates per position, the minimum number of candidates is sixteen; that translates into a significant number of signs.

There can be considerably more than sixteen candidates in Wards with large numbers of candidates vying for Councillor positions and we know this results in even greater number of signs. However, the high levels of interest in running for public office in Oakville are not surprising. Oakville residents have always been strongly engaged in their community and their engagement contributes to Oakville's liveability. Oakville benefits from the competition and choice in our elections. We believe for the short period of time elections signs are allowed, they are a very effective means to create visibility and awareness for individual candidates and the election itself. They are a positive contribution to our democratic process.

Why do we need election signs on public property?

Elections are a public matter. Transparency, fairness and equity are core to our democratic systems. They are a core part of who we are as Canadians. Public space is our space. Election signage within reason belongs in the public domain. Furthermore, signs alert the public that an election is imminent and thus increase voter awareness.

Incumbents have the Private Property sign advantage.

We are deeply concerned that banning elections signs on public property creates an advantage to incumbents. Incumbents have resident email lists not available to others and they often have a strong and established social media presence which a new candidate may not have developed to the same degree. Incumbents can quickly and easily dominate the private property signage through contacting their lists. Eliminating public signs for the short period they are allowed is simply unfair to new candidates.

How does a new candidate build name recognition?

Election signs on public lands allow new candidates to build name recognition while allowing incumbents fair access to the same public space. Their election signs serve as notice to us all that they are interested in serving the public good. Building name recognition is critical for newcomers as they undertake canvassing and other campaign activities. Name recognition is particularly important in municipal elections as all candidates run independent of political parties. In provincial and federal elections, the political parties provide support to local candidates and increase awareness of the election and party candidates. This additional level of support and awareness does not exist for municipal candidates, making election signs that much more important for them.

Do signs make a difference?

Signs start the name recognition process particularly in municipal elections. If advertising your name/business was not effective why are people paying the town to advertise on the medians, and in bus shelters? Why do local businesses put up signs? The Town itself uses its approved mobile sign locations to create awareness and visibility for specific messages. Nor are there

concerns that such signage creates a distraction for drivers. Why would only election signs be a distraction given they are also subject to regulations?

Cost of Signs?

Signs cost less than traditional media including newspaper advertising and TV, and cost less than mailing campaign literature.

What about social media?

Public elections belong in the public forum, visible to all, not just those who have readily available online access.

What about the environment?

Parts of election signs have always been recyclable. However, the entire sign can now be recycled as Vancouver is doing, creating plastic pallets from the signs. As well, some candidates are able to reuse signs from previous campaigns.

What are other ways to address concerns about the number of signs?

There are several options that would effectively address concerns, which should be considered and tested before resorting to the extreme of banning all public property signs:

1. Limiting the number of signs a candidate can place on public land. This also has the effect of equalizing campaign costs since all candidates have the same restrictions.
2. Increase the number of public locations for signs. Currently, signs are not allowed at community centres, libraries, or Town Hall. This has the effect of “bunching” signs on the few permitted areas. Limiting signs to one at these locations permits signs in public areas, which is where they belong.
3. Limiting the period during an election when signs can be placed in public locations. This would be most helpful in a municipal campaign which tends to have longer campaign periods.

Bylaw enforcement of signs?

There are fines for violating the bylaw and they help reduce the administrative costs of bylaw enforcement. Those fines can be increased to address costs. The sign deposit should also be increased and only returned if there are zero violations. This will ensure the town has funds needed for enforcement, it will incentivize adherence to the by-law and will only penalize a candidate who violates the by-law. Furthermore, there is no evidence that a candidate who ignores the existing by-law will not ignore a by-law that bans signs. Finally, of the many costs we incur as a Town supporting democracy, this should be a one of them. Monitoring election signs should be a priority for By-law enforcement during an election, noting that elections do not occur frequently and the timeframe is typically known well in advance.

What are other municipalities doing?

While some municipalities, including our immediate neighbours, Mississauga and Burlington have banned signs on public property, the majority of municipalities across Ontario continue to support the election process by permitting signs, including Ottawa and Toronto. Halton Region's bylaw banning signs on their roads has reduced election visibility on regional roads in Oakville and is likely contributing to the "bunching" effect on municipal roads. Rather than following Halton Region, the Town should ask Halton Region to reverse their ban.

Do election signs harm residents?

Given there are signs along roadways across Oakville for many reasons and safety is not compromised, there does not appear to be evidence to support the contention that only election signs are harmful to residents or distract drivers.

Does banning election signs on public property harm residents?

There does not appear to be any benefit to residents to ban public property signs. There is certainly no benefit to candidates; in fact, the inability to use signs to create awareness may be considered a barrier for a candidate. Banning public property signs only benefits incumbents. Accordingly, support for such a ban will be viewed as self serving for currently elected representatives.

Why is the Town not conducting public consultations on a motion that will give incumbents a clear advantage?

We do not have an answer for this but recommend holding a public consultation that can help bring forward solutions that support all candidates who put themselves forward to run for public offices, not just the incumbents. There is ample time to consult the public since an election at any level is likely a year or more away.

We respectfully ask all members of Council to vote against this motion. Instead, consider a public consultation and time to consider other options to address the sign concerns that have been raised by some. Let's keep the focus on continuing to have fair, visible elections that broaden our democracy, not narrow it.

Thank you for your consideration.

Elizabeth Chalmers

President, Joshua Creek Residents Association