

Issues drive city natives to run in civic elections:[Final Edition]

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For the first time since aboriginal people were allowed to vote in Vancouver elections -- in 1947 -- five native candidates are vying for civic office.

With an estimated urban aboriginal population of about 60,000 people, native candidates have a strong electoral base that they say is as unrepresented at city hall as it is on-reserve.

An aboriginal civic election forum with all candidates present is expected to draw a crowd tomorrow from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Vancouver Friendship Centre, 1607 E. Hastings.

"There are now three or four generations of urban aboriginal people, who may be marginalized or may be middle-class, but they neither vote in band elections back home nor feel they have a voice worth voting for at city hall," says Laurie McDonald, a Surrey teacher.

McDonald was born an Enoch Cree in Alberta -- "the West Edmonton Mall reserve," he jokes, but has worked as an aboriginal children's advocate and educator in B.C. for 18 years.

McDonald is convinced city council could develop programs with senior government to make life easier for aboriginal families. A high percentage of native families are headed by single women.

Jamie Lee Hamilton is well-known as a sex-trade workers' advocate but less known for her native heritage.

Her grandmother, Agnes St. Mark, was a Flathead Cree from Montana and her mother, Alice Hamilton, a fishermen's union member, helped found the Vancouver Indian Friendship Centre.

Hamilton says it's a civic responsibility to help aboriginal women in the city "just as it is to make sure more than a tiny percentage of First Nations kids graduate from high school."

She and McDonald are running for the CIVIC party, as are Metis criminology student Tyler Ducharme, 27, and elder Irene Schmidt, a seniors' rights activist.

Robert Kiyoshk, an Ojibway and the Vancouver Community College First Nations education co-ordinator, is running for COPE for school board.