

Sonali Verma to contest for Toronto City Council

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in Toronto

A number of Indo-Canadians and others of South Asian origin have already filed their nominations for the November 13 election in Toronto and other cities in Ontario, among them Sonali Verma, a senior journalist who has worked for UPI and Reuters in India, England, Hong Kong and Singapore.

Verma, who has been living in Toronto for six years, said she began getting increasingly concerned about the sad state of affairs in her area, Ward 1, given the overflowing garbage bins, broken sidewalks, badly maintained community centre and potholes in the parking lot she saw there.

So she decided to stand for public office, joining the ranks of a few early birds who filed their nominations in May even though the last date for filing nomination papers was September 29.

Her father Rajnikanta Verma, a former Indian high commissioner to Canada, traveled from India to provide support to his daughter's campaign. He is coming again to Toronto October 20 "to help me campaign, do media interviews, etc," she said.

Verma was amongst over 200 Indo-Canadians celebrating Diwali at Queen's Park. The chief guest was Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty.

There are 275 candidates [including the mayor] for the 45 wards of the Toronto City Council.

There are eight candidates in Ward 1, including Suzan Hall, who is serving her second term as the city councillor. Reports indicate Hall has Mayor David Miller's support. Jane Pitfield, who is also contesting for the post of mayor, recently appeared at a corn roast get-together and endorsed Verma's candidacy before more than 400 people.

"Miller has very little support in North Etobicoke [which is part of Ward 1] because a large number of people in this ward are disappointed with him," Verma said.

There are around 6,800 single detached home in this ward. Verma said she has visited many of these houses – she is going door to door – and spoken with the occupants.

According to the 2000 Census, the ward has an interesting profile with 30 percent of the voters being South Asians, some are Chinese and Africans. "The number of South Asians and other ethnic people has now increased in my ward as many more people have migrated here. So many more people have become Canadian citizens," she said. As with the provincial and federal elections, to vote in the municipal elections the voter has to be Canadian, 18 years or older.

"I don't think you can claim to represent people unless you actually meet with them, unless you have seen how they live, seen the broken sidewalks, the potholes.... That's why I wanted to go to every house in my ward," Verma said.

"Most people take great pride in their houses – their lawns are beautiful, they plant flowers and their driveways are clean. But when you go to any public space, it is a picture of neglect," she said.

She described the situation in the Islington and Albion areas, which has many Indian businesses, including jewellers, grocery stores, textile and clothing stores and restaurants.

"There are no trees there, only concrete. You see weeds, garbage dumpsters overflowing. When people come for canvassing [to my house] they are surprised 'Oh you have such a nice place but why do you live in such a grumpy area,' they ask," she said.

According to Verma, it was obvious that the city was not doing its job. "As a result we in this ward have a bad reputation. Our property value is 30 percent less than what they would be if the same house is located in Woodbridge (North of Rexdale/Etobicoke)," she said.

There are lots that are 50 x 100-200 ft in area in Rexdale but the difference, Verma said, is that the City of Woodbridge/Vaughan takes care of the public spaces. "You find flowers on the



■ Sonali Verma seen with Ontario Opposition Leader John Tory

roads, plants, trees they take a little bit of trouble to make sure the place is taken care of whereas in our ward it looks very neglected." She attributed this to "a lack of political will on the part of the City." Implicitly, Verma blamed incumbent Councillor Hall.

"She has lived here all her life and she's been in power now for six years but she doesn't obviously see what's wrong with the area," Verma said.

According to Verma, the city recently allocated \$1 million for improvement but Councillor Hall gave \$325,000 of the taxpayers' money to a playground that no one uses. Just across the road was a community center that a thousand children visit daily.

"As a member of the Ratepayers' Association, I volunteered to do gardening

there. With my own hands I planted flowers because we were ashamed the way things looked. When people go there they have to see what we are capable of doing, what kind of standards we accept," Verma said.

"If your community center looks like a dump, then it is hardly surprising that everything else around it looks like a dump," she said and called for higher standards that would include, among other things, garbage being cleaned, and flower gardens and trees being planted.

"The most important job you have is to pay attention to the needs of the people," she said. "That's not being done now and it is what induced me to seek public office. If elected, I shall get out and listen to the people in my ward and make real efforts to make improvements."