

Ecology Ottawa takes to the campaign trail

Environmental activist group borrows a page from politicians



JOANNE CHIANELLO

Velta Tomsons delivers her doorstep stump speech like a pro.

After introducing herself to the Blackburn Hamlet resident, Tomsons explains that she's looking for signatures for a petition asking the city to update its forestry management policy, which dates back to 2003.

"The city is doing a great job replanting the ash trees affected by the emerald ash borer," Tomsons says enthusiastically, "but we want the city to come up with a more long-term strategy."

The man at the door is happy to participate, and hands over his email address. After all, this is an area of town that's been affected by the infestation. He then agrees to answer a municipal election-related question about his voting priorities. How important, on a scale one to four, are environmental issues — nature conservation, transit and cycling infrastructure, and climate change — in deciding who to vote for come Oct. 27? He says "Three, somewhat important" (a common answer, it turns out).

The entire exchange takes about five minutes. If you didn't know better, you'd think Tomsons was a crackerjack political campaigner. And she is, except for a few key details.

For one thing, she's thanked by the Blackburn Hamlet resident for "all the great work you're doing ... good for you guys," which is a response politicians seldom hear at the doorstep.

The second and more important difference between Tomsons and a political candidate is that she's not running for office. She works with Ecology Ottawa, an environmental activist group that's decided to take its message to the (residential) streets during this election.

It's not unusual during campaigns for various interest groups to try to gauge the views of, and elicit promises from, candidates on a number of issues. For example, a myriad of organizations — labour, firefighters, advocates for electoral reform — will send candidates surveys and publish the results. At every ward debate I've attended, a representative of PAWS, an animal welfare group, has asked candidates whether they'd support a bylaw that bans the retail sale of cats, dogs and rabbits.

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Graham Saul, the executive director of Ecology Ottawa, has been an activist for decades. He says studies on the impacts of different forms of engagement show the results you'd expect — talking face-to-face with someone makes a much bigger impression than receiving an email.

"We needed a movement to develop a ground campaign, to act the way a political party does because it works," says Saul.

Last year, the environment group gave the door-to-door model a try in Blackburn Hamlet, where volunteers asked residents to sign a petition to support the city's plan to stop raw sewage from flowing into the Ottawa River. Before the canvass, Ecology Ottawa had 75 supporters in the specific area of town where they knocked on doors. After the canvass? 920.

In the larger community of Orléans, Ecology Ottawa's supporters jumped from 700 to 3,400 after a door-knocking blitz.

It's an impressive result, but achieving it took an enormous effort. In the summer of 2013, 10 people donated two days a week for three months. And just this past summer, almost 60 volunteers knocked on 11,000 doors in Innes ward. Their work of the past two summers means that Ecology Ottawa's electronic newsletter now gets out to 15 per cent of households in Ward 2.

It's hard to imagine most people being completely against Ecology Ottawa's three priorities for the election — "trees are not

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controversial," says Tomsons. And perhaps Ecology Ottawa is purposely framing its questions in a way that does make it difficult for people to dismiss. But whatever you think about the issues, it's impossible not to be impressed by the sheer effort of Ecology Ottawa volunteers to engage in the democratic process for their beliefs.

Canvassing isn't the only way Ecology Ottawa reaches out to people, of course. For instance, at this year's Glebe Garage Sale, the group collected 1,700 signatures for its petition opposing the Energy East pipeline — the most signatures the group has ever collected in a single day.

Still, the group has found that engaging people in conversation one-on-one is the most effective way to win new supporters, if also the most labour intensive. And going door-to-door in specific neighbourhoods has helped the group to reach outside its comfort zone, to talk to people who aren't already part of Ecology Ottawa's somewhat stereotyped supporter — a downtown, bicycle-riding granola cruncher.

"I don't think the problem is we don't have friends in the suburbs," says Saul. "The problem is we need to get off our butts and find them."

Candidates would say they're trying to find voters. Semantics. The reality is that Ecology Ottawa is running one of the more interesting campaigns in this election race.

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