

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE SINCE 1891

Municipal World

Celebrating 135 Years

31 QUESTIONS WITH **ELEANOR MCMAHON** Turning grief into action



The municipal trust gap:
Rebuilding confidence in
local government

Small municipality, big
culture: How engagement,
empathy, and fun shape
municipal workplaces

Strategies for developing
and implementing
political acumen

May 2026 | \$11.25
municipalworld.com

SSN 0027-3589



9 770027 358903



31 QUESTIONS WITH ELEANOR MCMAHON

Turning grief into action



McMahon's husband, Gregory Stobbart.
Photo courtesy of Stobbart family

< Eleanor McMahon, former MPP and cabinet minister, founded the Share the Road Cycling Coalition and successfully advocated for the passage of “Greg’s Law” after her husband, OPP Sgt. Greg Stobbart, was killed off duty while cycling. Now, 20 years after her husband’s death, McMahon looks back on what has been achieved so far in terms of bicycle safety and cycling infrastructure. *Photo: Cathie Coward*

by Greg Crone, Executive Editor

It may be one of the greatest examples of someone using their personal grief to not only do good but also to effect societal change.

In June 2006, Eleanor McMahon’s husband, OPP Sgt. Greg Stobbart, was killed off duty while cycling on a rural road in Milton, Ont. In the wake of his death, she founded the Share the Road Cycling Coalition and successfully advocated for the passage of “Greg’s Law,” which targets motorists who drive suspended, unlicensed, and uninsured. The driver who killed Stobbart had five previous convictions for driving while his licence was under suspension and racked up \$14,000 in fines.

McMahon had a unique base of political skills she brought to her self-imposed assignment honed on Parliament Hill where, prior to her marriage, she was a press secretary for federal cabinet minister Herb Gray as well as prime ministers John Turner and Jean Chretien.

McMahon, a native of Windsor, Ont., herself later entered politics as the MPP for Burlington and became an Ontario cabinet minister.

Now, 20 years after her husband’s death, she is in a reflective mood, looking back on what has been achieved so far in terms of bicycle safety and cycling infrastructure while preparing for 2026 Ontario Bike Summit, which will happen Sept. 22-24 in Toronto.

Edited for clarity and length.

1. You are from Windsor. How did your hometown influence your personal journey?

There’s something about Windsor. Windsor is a big-hearted town with big-hearted people. Of course, there’s big-hearted people everywhere, but one of the things that I loved about Windsor was its openness. I see that changing now a little bit, but it’s still there.

2. Does the fact that Windsor is a border town perhaps contribute to its mystique?

As young people, and as I got into university, we spent lots of time on the other



side of the border. The Tigers won the World Series. It was a very exiting time. It was a glorious, glorious time to grow up.

3. What is the most valuable thing you learned from your parents?

My dad, Hugh, worked at Chrysler on the administrative side. My mom, Marie, was a very serious, studious woman who really wanted to pursue higher education. It was her dream that all of her children would go to university – and they did.

Every single one of her kids, seven of them, graduated from university, two with PhDs. My mom studied in university and became a laboratory technologist. She worked at Children’s Hospital [of Michigan] in Detroit and then came back and worked in hospitals in Windsor.

4. Was your mother a particular influence on you?

She instilled in me stick-to-itiveness. My mom’s influence in particular was: put your head down, and work hard.

5. Didn’t your mother influence your life in another profound way?

It was my mom who got me involved in politics. It was my mom who said, “Herb Gray is running a campaign. Why don’t

you run down and volunteer?” And the rest is history.

6. What influence did Herb Gray, who is perhaps synonymous with Windsor, have on you?

I went to work for Herb Gray and saw the work that he’d been doing for years as an MP, and saw the way that people responded to him and how he responded to them and his way of doing public service.

7. What was it about Herb Gray that was so special?

He was very kind and smart. I feel very connected to him, and he taught me a lot, and I wish that I had been able to thank him for everything that he taught me, because he was an extraordinary person.

8. Did you work in the Chrysler plant as a young person?

Chrysler had programs where they hired the sons and daughters of employees and, because of my dad, I got a job on the line. It was a valuable experience for me.

I was going to school in Europe, and my parents said, you need to pay your way. I learned a lot working on the line and watching people and watching that dynamic.

9. What is your strongest memory from childhood?

I was the youngest of a big family with seven brothers and sisters, including myself. We spent our childhood outside and I used to run around the neighbourhood at five and six years old.

We'd walk in our skates to the park with the skate guards on. It was really magical growing up with all of that freedom and independence that was instilled by my mom.

10. Were you a big reader as a child?

I was a voracious reader. I had a vivid imagination, and I would take a flashlight to bed and read under the covers when I was supposed to be in bed sleeping.

11. What book do you remember from childhood?

I loved Nancy Drew. She was a great image of a young, independent, self-sufficient, smart young woman. That was a great role model for me as a young girl.

I wanted to be Nancy Drew. She was just the kind of young lady that I wanted to be. And there you are, so young and independent and smart.

12. Who was your favourite musician or band when you were growing up?

Andrew Lloyd Weber is someone who always inspired me. I love "Pie Jesu," the best-known part of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Requiem*. It's stunning.

13. Did music play a big role in your life?

We were quite a musical family growing up. My mom wanted us to stay busy and active and out of trouble. She also wanted to instill the gift of music, which thanks to her we all have.

We all sang in the choir. We all grew up playing piano. We had a piano in the house, and we all took lessons, which would cost my parents a lot of money. But they made the sacrifices so we could do that. My brothers and sisters and I would sing when we were doing the dishes.

14. What else influenced your interest in music?

I grew up next to Detroit, so there was the Motown influence. I'm not so much a rock 'n' roll person. I don't dislike it, but I'm more of a Motown/Diana Ross type of person than I am a Bob Seger person. Although, I like Bob Seger.



"The biggest obstacle that unfortunately remains now is the highly politicized environment we find ourselves in, which hasn't been helpful," McMahon said. "We all want fewer cars on the road where it works and makes sense. What I am doing is taking the know-how that I have and turning that into a positive direction." Photo: Cathie Coward

15. What world leader, living or dead, do you admire most?

Václav Havel, the poet and writer and later president of the Czech Republic, is someone I admire, because of the freedom fighter that he was.

16. What was it that you admired about him?

He never forgot about people, and the importance of freedom. Something that we take for granted sometimes in Canada.

17. If you had to organize a dinner party with three well-known people, living or dead, who would you pick?

Rosalie Abella, the former Supreme Court of Canada justice, because she's incredibly important in her work as a woman and as a jurist, and her embrace of humanity and human rights is really important.

I'd love to spend more time with Prime Minister Mark Carney and understand more about him, because he's really fascinating and really interesting and someone that I greatly admire.

I'd love to have Clara Hughes, the Olympic athlete, at dinner. Clara is someone I admire for her perseverance and her challenges with mental health.

18. How do you deal with conflict?

I am conflict adverse. I don't find conflict productive. I know it happens and it exists, but I don't seek it out and I don't particularly like it.

What I have understood throughout my life, and when it comes from a family of seven children and nine people, conflict can't exist in a house like that for very long. It exists, but it can't last, because you all feel it. It's important to learn how to diffuse it. I come from a family of conflict-averse group of people.

19. How did Herb Gray influence the way you deal with conflict?

Herb Gray had a wonderful sense of humour and used humour to disarm people. He used humour with great skill to diffuse difficult situations, which you find in politics. And he taught me that having a sense of humour is critical in life and in politics to manage difficult moments and to have that sense of perspective.

20. The grief you experienced when your husband was killed cycling is unimaginable. How did you summon the strength to turn that grief into something positive by founding the Share the Road Cycling Coalition and successfully advocating for the passage of "Greg's Law"?

I'm a relentlessly positive person. Greg was also a relentlessly positive person in a profession that has a lot of negativity, for obvious reasons. He was very determined and focused and very disciplined. I was grieving and I cannot sit still and not address the tragic loss that I've had.

21. You somehow used your own grief?

The way for me to get through this time is channelling my grief into doing something about it. After Greg was killed, the loss and the injustice of it fuelled my sensibilities that were already there.

22. It will be 20 years this June since your husband Greg's untimely death, so is it perhaps a natural time to reflect?

When Greg was killed, I decided that I wanted to do something important in his memory. As I talked to people about what I could do, I set out on a journey.

23. What did this journey entail?

It was a journey to talk to as many people as I could. So, I went back to the politicians who called after he died, and the network that I had, including the premier at the time. I talked to politicians on both sides of the house.

24. How did the influence of Herb Gray help guide you?

As I learned from Herb Gray, you need to work across the aisle. And I worked with everyone, because cycling should never be a partisan issue.

25. Cycling has made great strides in the past 20 years but, today, there is perhaps an anti-cycling "war on the car" narrative, aimed at suburban voters, that is being stoked by the current government at Queen's Park. What can you do to counter it?

The biggest obstacle that unfortunately remains now is the highly politicized environment we find ourselves in, which hasn't been helpful.

In actual fact, over the last 20 years of doing this work, travelling

internationally, listening and learning from the Europeans, learning from my colleagues in the United States, I have never, ever encountered one study in all that time that says it's cycling that causes traffic congestion. It simply does not.

26. What argument in favour of cycling resonates best?

The bike in front of you or beside you is the car that isn't. We all want fewer cars on the road where it works and makes sense. What I am doing is taking the know-how that I have and turning that into a positive direction.

27. How did you do that?

We started doing polling, which I learned early on in my political career was a valuable tool to change the conversation.

Lo and behold, we found that 87 per cent of people in Ontario who cycle frequently also drive frequently. Right now, in Ontario, there are 3.2 million people or 22 per cent of Ontarians that ride almost daily in our province.

So it's not cyclists versus drivers. There is no war on the car. And we have a responsibility to collectively make it safer for those people.

28. The Ontario government cancelled the Ontario Municipal Commuter Cycling (OMCC) program in 2018, removing a key funding source for municipal cycling infrastructure. What does this mean for the challenge you face?

What I find heartbreaking is that more people have lost their lives, unfortunately, partly do to a lack of infrastructure. More people shouldn't lose their lives because they choose to do something that is good for their health and good for the environment.

29. You value freedom. Is there a freedom aspect to cycling?

People want their children to ride bicycles as I did when I was a kid, to drive my bike everywhere and to have that sense of independence and freedom that Dutch children have, that British children have, that Italian kids have. Why are our children and why are we robbed of those same opportunities? So that remains the driving force behind the Share the Road Cycling Coalition.

As we look to the 20th year of my journey after Greg's death, and then starting the coalition in 2008, after a couple of years of significant research, it's sort of like the song "New York, New York." If they can do it there, why can't we do it here?

30. You were minister of tourism, culture and sport in the previous Ontario government. Is there a big tourism angle to cycling?

The Government of Quebec just did a study and found that \$600 million a year is added to their economy and 6,000 jobs are created as a consequence of cycling. Tourism is a powerful economic driver. So we hope to continue the progress. We need government to be along with us.

31. What is the impetus for the Ontario Bike Summit that's being planned for September?

Our organization has continued a very steady path of diligent work over the last decade and a half where we have focused on building, building capacity, and sharing all in the municipal sector.

This is what our conference is all about. It's hope and hard work and finding ways to share inspiration and information, because that's what we do.

as published in

MUNICIPAL WORLD

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE | WE SHARE YOUR STORIES | MUNICIPALWORLD.COM

You Shape The Future



Isn't it time you joined Canada's largest
community of municipal leaders?
Let's talk about membership.

Funded by the Government of Canada
Financé par le gouvernement du Canada



It's Easy to Join

Activate your free MW Essentials
Membership to receive a complimentary gift.
www.municipalworld.com/membership

Scan the
QR Code for
details and
to register.



1-888-368-6125 | www.municipalworld.com