

One year in, most approve of Watson

By Neco Cockburn, The Ottawa Citizen October 25, 2011 6:56 AM

OTTAWA — Mayor Jim Watson has the approval of most Ottawa residents one year after the municipal election, a new poll suggests.

The poll, conducted over the weekend by Forum Research Inc., found that 66 per cent of 406 people surveyed said they approve of the job Watson is doing as mayor, a number that puts him fifth among mayors of Canada's 15 largest cities.



The release of the poll results happen to coincide with the one-year anniversary of last year's Oct. 25 election. During an unrelated interview held on Monday to mark the occasion, Watson said that "there's a general sense that people like what we're doing here at City Hall and they find it to be a little more calm and stable.

"I made a number of what I consider important but realistic promises, and people have seen us slowly but surely go down that list of commitments made and have them checked off," he said.

"I'm not exactly a flashy kind of guy, but I think they like the fact that I'm a community person that tries to get out to different community events, and I'm approachable."

If anything, Watson said, one of his "weaknesses" may be accepting too many invitations to those events each week, from community meetings to fundraisers, functions and farmers' markets. His presence across the city during days, nights and weekends has been one of the marks of his tenure.

Although Watson said he enjoys crossing the city to attend a dozen events on a Saturday, and doing so also keeps him grounded in what's happening in the community, "It does take its toll." And the more events he goes to, the more he's asked to visit.

The problem is that the post-amalgamation city has grown since Watson's previous stint as mayor in the late 1990s.

"I find that I've got to do a better job of pacing myself, because I'm still getting used to the geography of the new city, because the old city that I was mayor of was pretty compact," he said.

"I've got to do a better job of managing my time and delegating more to the deputy mayors."

Lorne Bozinoff, president of Forum Research, said the poll results put Watson ahead of the national approval average of 56 per cent and indicate that "he's off to a good start.

"I'm assuming there's been no real mess-ups in Ottawa in this past year," Bozinoff said.

"He must have had a good year with not a lot of controversy, in terms of negative controversy."

The poll also found that 47 per cent of respondents said they would vote for Watson in the next election, while 53 per cent would choose "someone else."

That is another good showing for Watson, Bozinoff said, since maintaining 47 per cent would make the incumbent almost impossible to beat unless there was just one other candidate, which would stop vote-splitting.

(There were 20 people who ran for mayor in the Oct. 25, 2010, election, and Watson captured 48.7 per cent of the vote. His closest opponent, Larry O'Brien, received about 24 per cent, while Clive Doucet followed with almost 15 per cent.)

The percentage of residents who approve of Watson's work puts him fifth among big-city mayors. Hazel McCallion of Mississauga (78 per cent), Naheed Nenshi of Calgary (76 per cent), Regis Labeaume of Quebec City (74 per cent) and Dianne Watts of Surrey (68 per cent) ranked higher.

Results for Gerald Tremblay of Montreal (32 per cent), Rob Ford of Toronto (37 per cent) and Gregor Robertson of Vancouver and Sam Katz of Winnipeg (both 49 per cent) were lowest. Most mayors with poor approval ratings "are mired in controversial issues," Bozinoff said.

Labeaume was the mayor for whom the largest percentage of people said they would vote again (67 per cent), followed by McCallion (61 per cent), Nenshi (58 per cent), Watts (54 per cent) and Watson.

A much smaller percentage of people said they would re-elect Tremblay (21 per cent), Ford (30 per cent), Bob Bratina of Hamilton (35 per cent) and Katz (37 per cent).

The poll was conducted from Oct. 21 to 23. The margin of error for all cities except Toronto is plus or minus 4.9 per cent, 19 times out of 20. For Toronto, the margin of error is plus or minus 3.1 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

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