

VOTE 2014: Aurora shouldn't be run like a business? but as a business, says candidate Frank Vrbanatz



By Brock Weir

It doesn't take Frank Vrbanatz very long to get straight to the point on his reasons for putting his name forward as a Council candidate in this month's municipal election.

'I don't like the way things are run,' he says.

And there you have it.

The retired President and CEO of Villeroy & Boch's Canadian arm, now based on Berczy Street, is no stranger to business and when he looks on at recent and not-so-recent decisions made at Town Hall, he says he believes the business of the Town should be run truly as a business.

'When Mr. Dawe announced he was running again for mayor, he said governments should be run more business-like and I think it should be run more like a business, period,' he said, before being asked how he would define the difference. 'One is phoney and one actually runs it that way.'

He says he was struck by this difference in discussions that took place around the Council table this summer, which ultimately led to the approval of the Joint Operations Centre, the decision to forge ahead with hiring a creator for the newly-restored Aurora Museum at the Aurora Cultural Centre, and proposed improvements for Aurora's Downtown Core.

'We can't spend any money until we actually know what is going to go into there,' said Mr. Vrbanatz on uncertainty in Downtown Aurora, including the interests of building-owners in the area as well as no official word just yet on the future of the Aurora United Church site. 'It's the taxpayers' money and that is what I am always concerned about with government. They don't run it as a business and they are not accountable to the taxpayer until the next election comes up. But, that is once every four years and in four years you can do a hell of a lot of s---.

'I think we need more meetings with voters to see what the business and the community members actually want.'

Sometimes, he suggested, it should be up to community members to vote with their feet, as is the case with the Aurora Museum. Mr. Vrbanatz says he is unconvinced that every York Region municipality needs its own museum and suggests a museum to celebrate the heritage of York Region overall, with sections devoted to municipalities like Aurora, Newmarket, and Richmond Hill would be

ideal.

‘For the amount of people that go to museums, how often it is used, and how much it costs, there should be a museum for the entire area,’ he says.

But such decisions ultimately have to be made at Town Hall and, in particular, by a Council that is restructured.

Mr. Vrbanatz says he is against a ward system for Aurora. Council should work as a team for the entire community and not just an individual Councillor working for a particular neighbourhood, but he does agree that Council should be knocked down to six members from the current eight, and made full-time positions.

‘We should run it as a business, and not just a part-time hobby for these people,’ he says.

Once that is in place – and even if the Council complement remains status quo – there should be significant changes in the responsibilities of Councillors. If elected, he would like to bring forward the concept of a Cabinet-style Council with each Councillor responsible and accountable for a specific Town department, such as Parks or Infrastructure. This would give residents a more direct line to the various departments at Town Hall, he argues and, perhaps, lay the groundwork for new ideas being brought forward by Councillors and being followed through by the same individuals.

‘It seems to be that staff bring all these ideas to Council and they either pass them or they don’t,’ he says. ‘I am so sick of consultants. Consultants report to rubber-stampers. We should hire people who know what they are doing and what they should be looking at. We shouldn’t need a consultant to tell us we need four strings instead of three, and that is what seems to be happening.’

Looking ahead over the next few weeks, Mr. Vrbanatz says he believes his business experience, particularly at the international level, is something that will hold him in good stead. It provided him valuable perspective on the wide-ranging ideas that can come from people from – and specializing in – wide ranging areas. A challenge, on the other hand, will be going into the Council chamber if elected knowing he is but one vote at the table.

‘Working for a consensus is the hardest thing to do,’ he says. ‘I don’t think [Council] do enough working behind the scenes, working person to person, explaining to each other their feelings to get them on their side.’

‘I am one of these guys that bitches and bitches and bitches – in fact, I was going to start a website called ‘Bitch’ – but I want to bring some of those changes I think are relevant. I don’t understand how they are not accountable for the dollar. It is your dollar. If it was all my hard-earned money, I could do whatever the hell I want with it, but it is not theirs and they should be looking after it better.’