

Affordable housing in focus at all-candidates debate

By Brock Weir

The lack of affordable housing in the Aurora area is a challenge that has been recognized by all levels of government in recent years, but despite the issue coming into sharp focus every time a new multi-unit residential build is proposed, concrete solutions have yet to come forward.

This is an issue that is top of mind for many voters, and it is an issue Aurora's candidates had to face head-on last week at the Aurora Chamber of Commerce's All-Candidates debate.

Candidates from all party stripes from both sides of Aurora's riding divide had the chance to tell potential voters just how a vote for them would help alleviate the pressure.

First to tackle the matter was Newmarket-Aurora NDP candidate Yvonne Kelly, who said her party is offering a 'strong housing platform' and, if elected, intends to bring forward a National Housing Strategy.

'We had one of those in the 1990s and the Liberals decided to leave housing and the building of affordable housing stock to the marketplace,' said Ms. Kelly. 'We all know how well that turned out. Now, we're living in a time of housing crisis, not only in Aurora, but right across Canada.'

Addressing a point made earlier in the debate by Newmarket-Aurora Liberal candidate Tony Van Bynen on attracting people to this community for business, she said employment and housing go hand-in-hand.

An NDP government would 'invest heavily' in housing, facilitate 30-year mortgage rate extensions, and create 500,000 units of 'quality affordable housing over the next 10 years.'

'We'll scrap the Federal portion of the GST and HST for those constructing new affordable units [and offer incentives] to kickstart the development of co-op social housing and non-profit housing,' she said, noting that she has visited area co-ops and found them 'wonderful' but residents are worried about their long-term viability.

Further proposals include investing in energy retrofits and 'standing up to speculators and foreign investors' who are buying homes and driving up housing prices 'without any intention of living here.'

'We need to address this national crisis we have now.'

Andrew McCaughtrie, Newmarket-Aurora's candidate for the

People's Party of Canada, joined the conversation next.

He addressed the issue from a standpoint of ?immigration? stating his party proposes reducing the number of immigrants coming into Canada on a per-annum basis.

?This is going to take a lot of pressure off our affordable housing and a lot of pressure off new builds,? he claimed. ?Our population is simply growing too fast right now and we need to take a step back and figure out how we're going to deal with all these things. I know our hospital in Newmarket is pretty much at capacity. The population is growing too fast for the hospital to keep up as well. These are real problems that are affecting people.?

None of the remaining parties at the table picked up the thread of these immigration claims and instead focused on their party platforms.

Newmarket-Aurora Conservative candidate Lois Brown, in her response, cited a speech made earlier this year by York Region Chair Wayne Emmerson who said a solution for the affordable housing problem will require both the Federal and Provincial governments to come to the table. Citing the Conservatives' proposal to make things easier for first-time homebuyers by removing the stress test on mortgages, she said she did agree with the NDP on some proposals.

?First, we want to fix the mortgage stress test,? said Ms. Brown. ?Secondly, we want to increase the amortization of insured mortgages to 30 [years], so NDP, thank you for coming to the table. We want to launch an inquiry into money laundering in the real estate market. We need to work with our Provincial counterparts on that initiative and thank you to the NDP for saying they would support us in that. The last thing that we think we have the ability to do is make surplus Federal properties available for development in all our urban areas.?

First-time home buyers were top of mind for Walter Bauer, Green Party candidate for Newmarket-Aurora. Looking back 20 years, Mr. Bauer said the area was a draw for ?largely first-time buyers? but this is not the case anymore.

?Contrary to what you just heard the Conservatives say, foreign ownership under the Harper government was encouraged,? he said. ?They introduced the immigrant investor venture capital pilot program. What that did is it encouraged foreigners to come and buy property here even though they weren't living here. It encouraged speculators and money launderers. The Green Party would eliminate that.

?Aurora is currently almost fully developed, but we need more high-density affordable housing. The Green Party would appoint a minister of housing, provide \$750 million for new builds ? that's 3,000 homes ? provide tax incentives for the conversion of existing properties to rental housing, \$750 million to rent assistance, correct Air BNB misuse, finance co-op housing,

provide additional shelters for the homeless. The Green Party would legislate housing as a fundamental human right, as opposed to just throwing it out to private sector and having numerous homeless on our streets.?

As a former banker, Newmarket-Aurora Liberal candidate Tony Van Bynen addressed the Conservatives' proposal to eliminate the mortgage stress test. Such tests, he said, are important because he has seen ?what has happened to families because they didn't know how they are going to make their next mortgage payment ? and that is because somebody wilfully put them into a situation they can't afford.?

?Every Canadian should have a safe and affordable place to call home,? he said, noting his community volunteerism including, as Mayor of Newmarket, helping to spearhead the Belinda's Place shelter for homeless women, which has helped find a permanent home for more than 200 women in the past 18 months.

He cited the example of the apartments at 212 Davis Drive, Newmarket, the first private rental unit built in York Region in 20 years as a success story.

?We need to make investments to improve the availability and the affordability of our housing,? he said. ?The Federal Government has created Canada's first national housing strategy. We have committed \$55 billion over 10 years and we're committing to make that happen for new units, for renovations, for affordable housing units. The platform the Liberal government has announced just recently includes an increase to the first-time homebuyers [guide] where we moved the value of the purchase up to 800,000 and we're also going to be putting in a 1 per cent non-resident tax for foreign speculators.?

Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill Libertarian candidate Serge Korovitsyn ended the discussion with a kicker.

Stating the Federal and Provincial government needs to make land available for new developments, he said, ?There is no such thing as affordable housing. It is never affordable. It is affordable if you work hard.?