

Affordable housing, stable neighbourhoods tackled in Chamber debate



By Brock Weir

Affordable housing has been an issue Council has grappled with for the better part of a decade, and this municipal election campaign is no exception.

Local candidates, however, had their chance to dig deeper into this issue last Wednesday evening as the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, in association with the Toronto Real Estate Board, hosted their all-candidates meeting at the Royal Venetian on Industrial Parkway South.

Over 150 people attended the meeting not only to meet all 16 Council candidates but hear how the four men vying to be Aurora's next mayor would tackle issues as varied as the migration of business to the Bayview Avenue corridor, to recreational marijuana sales, to the perennial issue of affordable housing.

‘Housing affordability is a major issue throughout the GTA, including Aurora,’ said moderator Stephen Somerville, posing a prepared question to the four candidates. ‘How would you help ensure that home ownership continues to be attainable for all?’ Geoff Dawe was the first candidate to tackle what he described as a ‘very challenging question.’

One of his daughters is looking to buy a house in Aurora with her husband, he said, and she is experiencing this very issue firsthand. ‘The issue of affordability is more at a Regional and Provincial level than at the municipal level,’ Mr. Dawe offered. ‘What we can do and what we have done is look at the elements introduced a while ago: second suites, to legalize basement apartments, as an example. I think we also need to look at how we can change our zoning and density requirements. The reality is the bigger the house and/or the bigger the lot, the more expensive the product. We have to look at how we can work with our zoning, with our Official Plan, to provide incentives for builders to provide that element where they are going to build a little more dense to get the cost per unit down.

‘Daniels up on John West Way did that very effectively by putting in stacked townhouses. I think those are products we probably need to look at and there are issues that come with that: increased traffic, parking and we need to see how we can work with that and how we can move that forward to provide that capability to our younger people.’

Next up was Mr. Mrakas, who said the Town needs to work with the development community to provide a ‘diverse stock’ of housing options.

‘If someone is coming to do development, we need to push and use the tools that are provided to us within our Official Plan to ask them and actually ensure that they provide bungalows, townhomes, single family dwelling homes, not just looking at maximizing their profits, but providing our residents and our community with what we need, not what they want. At the end of the day it is up to us and it is up to the political will of Council to ensure that we get what we want as a community.’

Mr. Abel labelled the affordable housing issue as ‘a crisis that is recognized nationally’ and has impacted the ability of their children to plant firm roots in Aurora.

‘Our children migrate downtown so they can find a rental unit and job opportunities,’ he said. ‘We have to reverse that by creating incubator hubs like on the Hallmark land [to create] job opportunities, but we really have to put down a policy and I put forward a Notice of Motion that was adopted at Council and we are going to work with the Region, the Province and the Federal Government

to come up with our own strategy and opportunity to identify?when developers come with applications, we should say we're looking for 20 per cent or 10 per of affordable housing. Affordable housing is rental units and that is different than subsidized and very important for our future.?

Mr. Ballard said he has three children in their late 20s and early 30s who are in a similar situation and none of them are likely to end up living in Aurora in a home of their own.

?What we really need in this Town is a good mixture of housing. We have focused on detached homes, homes on large lots. We need to look at affordable, purpose-built rental accommodation. There has been one purpose-built rental building in all of York Region in the past 20 years ? 212 Davis Drive ? and we need that for two reasons: we need that because there are a lot of seniors who want to move from their homes into good quality rental, and for youth.?

STABLE NEIGHBOURHOODS

A significant focus has indeed been placed on large lots over the course of the campaign. In the case of the Stable Neighbourhoods issue, it is a matter of large lots being used to build very large homes that are out of keeping with the surrounding neighbours.

Each of the mayoral candidates was asked if they were in favour of ?protecting neighbourhoods from incompatible developments such as Monster Homes? and what ?concrete steps? each would do to protect neighbourhoods from incompatible development.

Each candidate said they were committed to protecting neighbourhoods, but their approaches differed.

Mr. Mrakas, for instance, said he was fully in favour of protecting Stable Neighbourhoods and offered a ?three-prong approach? to tackling the issue.

?That three-prong approach is we need to put site plan controls in, which we have done, we need to have architectural guidelines. They have to be unique for each three individual areas because all areas are unique on themselves. Regency Acres is different from Aurora Heights, which is different from Town Park, so we need to put those measures in place and after the architectural guidelines,? he said.

?We do need to make some changes with the zoning to make sure they align with our Official Plan. Once we do that and once we have all three measures in place, I believe that is the beginning of being able to protect our stable neighbourhood from inappropriate infill development which leads to Monster Homes. Everything has to fit within the character of the community and that is part of the architectural guidelines that will be put in place. Without that three-prong approach, it will not be achieved, I think that is what we will do to move forward and better protect our Stable Neighbourhoods.?

Up next was Mr. Abel, who said Council has made it ?very clear? they want to protect stable neighbourhoods.

?Easily we can see that people if they want to build their dream home, and we have examples, they look beautiful, they conform, and they are a treasure for the people that own it and live in it,? he offered. ?Then we see developers coming in and maximizing these homes. We have to go to our developers and say, ?Put the language in that puts the ones that we accept and the ones that we don't.' That is their expertise, it is complex, but they are the ones who can do it. It is that simple. It's a common sense approach to protect our Stable Neighbourhoods.?

On Mr. Ballard's part, he said he is currently living in a situation where there is one ?really big home? next door to him and two more across the street.

?I have an opinion about infill houses and these types of homes that really do not belong in established neighbourhoods, quite frankly. I am flabbergasted and it speaks to a lack of Council leadership, just not Mayoral leadership, because I have been speaking to Councillors for a number of years now on this looming crisis and I told them time and again this is going to be if not the biggest issue in the municipal election, one of the biggest issues of the next municipal election and it is,? he said. ?We need a real interim control bylaw and we need to make sure our zoning bylaws align with the 2010 Official Plan which laid out very clearly how to protect established neighbourhoods.?

Mr. Dawe, on the other hand, said it's a leader's job to listen to residents and those living in stable neighbourhoods aren't unanimous in their position that tighter controls need to happen.

?We like to talk about leadership and one of the things a leader has to do is listen to everyone and there was a number of people who came to us privately and said, ?We don't want any changes. We don't want you to do that, because I don't want you to effect the value of my house,? said Mr. Dawe. ?We need to listen to those people as well and we need to come up with an objective, balanced approach to how we handle this. That is why I supported the site plan, that is why I support architectural guidelines, and that is why I supported the hiring of an independent consultant to get that objectivity to see how we can move forward in a way that benefits all of our residents.?