

Aurora Votes 2018: McGrath wants to build 'liveable community' with a business voice

By Brock Weir

A pink car planted the seed.

Vicky McGrath spotted the vehicle after she and her family spent years caring for their ailing mother, who eventually died in long-term care. At that moment, the civil servant thought there had to be a better alternative to long-term care, and set about to do something about it.

Those colourful cars have become the hallmark of her Nurse Next Door company, which provides at-home care for those in need. She touched upon a gap, and the business has gone from strength to strength. Now, she has turned her focus on bringing this business sense to Aurora's Council table.

Ms. McGrath is one of 16 candidates vying for six Council seats in next month's Municipal Election.

'I felt Aurora could use some new voices at the table, some new perspectives,' says Ms. McGrath on why she entered the race. 'I also feel there's a lot of value in bringing a business voice to the table in Aurora. I don't feel there is a lot of consideration for the business community at Aurora Council currently. I feel there could be better communications amongst the business community and the Town.'

Another asset she says she brings to the table is her 20 years experience as a civil and public servant. She entered the sector with a degree in environmental studies from Trent University, coupled with a Masters Degree from Cambridge in Sustainability Leadership with a focus on Global Business.

'I think all those things together with my new business experience would provide some fresh perspective at the Town that isn't currently part of the mix.'

Nurse Next Door's work with the 'frail, elderly, sick and disabled' has given Ms. McGrath what she describes as a new perspective on 'accessibility, pedestrian orientation, and inclusivity in community design.' But these principles, she says, should permeate all aspects of public life, including planning and the development of programs.

'I would say that sustainable community building is all around making life better for everyone, people in terms of businesses having access to skilled and experienced employees, employees having access to the things that they need while they are at work, green space, obviously lots of connected green space, and lots of things for people to do and want to do in a community 'live, work and play in the same community,' she says. 'The population is aging and Aurora is no different. The largest population in Aurora right now is 55 and older and I don't see that changing. We want to keep those people in Aurora. We don't want them to take their resources, their ideas, their skills elsewhere. We want them to stay here and stay at home in Aurora and enjoy the things we have to offer here as well as the things that are available to them outside of Aurora.'

Had she been at the table over the last four years, there are some issues where she says her perspective might have been of value. Property acquisition is just one area, she says. Land available for development is all but gone and future growth will have to come from infill, intensification and redevelopment.

Last month, the Town issued notice they were going to designate 15 buildings along the historic Yonge Street core under the Ontario Heritage Act. That is a pretty significant number of buildings to consider, says Ms. McGrath, and this consideration should not be done over the summer.

'There's a number of people probably away from the community right now for the summer, on vacation, probably not thinking about how that heritage designation is going to affect them in the future,' she says. 'Having significant designations like that going on should not happen over the summer. Hiring for an Economic Development [Board] over the summer with an outgoing Council is another activity that might have waited until the fall or until the new Council is in place, when the new Council might have ideas to bring to the table, ideas on how the Committee might be able to do a different job than the one coming in under an outgoing Council.'

Yonge Street, she adds, is a particular priority. It is a local corridor as much as it is a Regional corridor, and the Province has designated it an intensification zone, complete with public transit. Ms. McGrath says there is a gap in Aurora in 'not engaging in that vision.' More should be done to make Aurora's stretch of Yonge a regional corridor like it is in Newmarket and in the south end of Town.

'We could do a lot more to bring in public transit, which would be better for our employees, better for our businesses, to allow for a more pedestrian-oriented accessible vibe on the street with more seating, which would enliven the area. Yonge Street would benefit

having a lot more connection to the community, but I also feel it is the right place for redevelopment, for intensification, for putting in those larger buildings with mixed use. It is the right place for these redevelopment plans to go.?

To that end, Ms. McGrath says there is ?a lot of value? in having a central space along Yonge Street, such as Library Square, for public gathering, but there are other issues that need to be addressed, as mentioned above.

?I feel like Library Square is a good idea, but it has to be part of that broader picture of what Yonge Street is going to be and I feel we need to take all of those things into consideration,? she says. ?It shouldn't be a piecemeal approach like designating heritage buildings over the summer when no one's around to say anything about it.?

As one of sixteen candidates vying for six Council seats, this is a very different election. The outgoing Council knew this would be the case when they voted to reduce their numbers by two seats, adding it was likely the first step on the road to introducing a ward system of representation. On this point, Ms. McGrath has mixed views. She says she doesn't lean in one way or another, seeing value in both a system where one Councillor is responsible for a specific area of town as well as having six Councillors who are accountable to the community at large.

?I feel like they both have value, and I know as a resident of Aurora I can call on all of them or one of them to have my voice heard,? she says.

?[If I'm elected] I feel informing the future planning of this community is something I would like to do. I would like to have a say in what goes forward in the community and make sure that people are collaborated with so that there is an age-friendly, pedestrian-oriented, inclusive, gender-equitable community going forward. I feel like I could probably bring that to just about any conversation around the Council table.?