

Aurora's Chief Electoral Officer gets satisfaction seeing people exercise their right to vote



By Brock Weir

Whether he was looking after his sisters and brother, or working as a cub leader, Stephen Huycke grew up with a sense of serving others and taking care of what was given to you.

After a stint working in the field of intellectual property management, however, he was able to make this early sense of duty a career, transitioning into the field of municipal government.

Mr. Huycke is Aurora's Town Clerk and, as such, is the Town's Chief Electoral Officer. To boil it down, Monday's election is his baby, a responsibility shared with his extensive support team, and one for which he has been laying the groundwork for months.

"Planning for an election starts pretty much in October or November of the year before because we have to plan even for candidate nominations, which are open on the first business day of the New Year," says Mr. Huycke. "The number of candidates will never change the blueprint. All that does is change the size of the ballot and sometimes the number of ballots you have to produce. Whether there is one candidate or 100 candidates, we function the same way."

Now, with Monday being just a few short days away, Mr. Huycke says the "to do list" in his department is still quite long. In planning for an election there are "tons" of things you simply can't do ahead of time, he explains. You can plan for just about every eventuality, but some things need to be deployed at just the right time.

They are now finalizing staffing assignments on election day, making sure temporary election workers know where they need to be on Monday and, of course, what they need to do. Ballots need to be delivered to their appointed locations, and then the machinery that is election day itself springs into action.

"The magnitude of the election process is huge," he says. "Yes, we do a lot of planning, but a lot of it we can't actually put into operations until towards the very end."

Even from his teen years, Mr. Huycke, a resident of Markham, says he always had an interest in the workings of government. He studied Canadian political history at university, as well as public administration law, and public administration itself.

"This interest comes from a real sense that public service is very, very important," he says.

His transition to the municipal realm, however, only happened about five years ago. After working in intellectual property, he was

looking for a change and different opportunities, and "stumbled" into municipal government after being "literally thrown into the deep end being part of a team managing a by-election" within four months of being hired.

"I absolutely fell in love with the work," he says. "I really get great satisfaction out of being in municipal government and I can see this being my career for a very long time as a result of it. It really answers my need to serve the public in some way, and in a very direct way."

A great deal of his responsibilities as Town Clerk are set down in Provincial legislation. He sees his role as an advisor to Council whether it is on procedure or process. A Clerk as an advisor is "independent and neutral", he says, and that is always how he approaches the job.

Similarly, while his role as Chief Electoral Officer is set out in legislation as well, he sees himself as an "independent administrator" of municipal elections to ensure "voters are able to exercise their fundamental democratic rights to vote for the candidates of their choice in a fair, unbiased, and open role."

"I just stick to the legislation and principles of the act, and it will serve me well."

While his roles and responsibilities are set out for him, he is particularly looking forward to the chance to get out of the office for a little bit on Monday, visiting a few polling stations, and seeing his team's work and planning in action.

"The greatest satisfaction I have is to actually see people exercising their fundamental democratic rights and knowing I have played a role in making that happen," he says. "We have to keep the team here on their toes and make sure everyone has what they need to get the job done. We have a great team here and we have an extensive team involved in this."

Although he says he will take great satisfaction when the last results are tabulated and reported on Monday night, there will be little time to rest on the laurels of another election in Aurora's history books. Mr. Huycke will then need to certify the results, and pick up plans for the inauguration of the new Council set for December.

"Everyone assumes that elections end on the 27th for the Clerk " they don't; it doesn't," he says.

Post-election, his department goes into Phase 2: certifying the election results and then planning for the inauguration set for December.