

Better? Needs improvement? Candidates are questioned on where outgoing Council has fallen short

By Brock Weir

An election wouldn't be complete without at least one candidate stating "more should be done" on any particular subject and Aurora's municipal campaign is no exception.

What sets this campaign apart, however, is that three of the four men vying for Aurora's top job are incumbent members of the outgoing Council.

At a recent all-candidates meeting hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, mayoral candidate John Abel was asked about a claim on his website that there "are some important issues that have not been addressed. These issues should have triggered alarm bells within Town Hall but the sad fact [is] they are not getting things done."

The Chamber asked him to elaborate on this claim.

"We spent eight years on Council and one of the major things that would be the GO Station congestion. We have opportunities to work with the Region and Metrolinx to alleviate the congestion and try and create public transit," he said. "Another big eyesore, which is a signature, is the Howard Johnson's abandoned building that is a blight on our downtown core. If you could imagine that was an operating hotel what a huge, huge significant boost that would be to revitalizing our downtown. Bringing in tournament fields. Too little too late in the last quarter trying to rush through the Armoury and the Hallmark Lands and ball diamonds. It just shows you that our system, what we have done here, is costing us money.

"We didn't do any due diligence, we don't do business cases, and it is going to cost taxpayers a lot of money to fill the spending habits this Council has done. If it doesn't improve the lives of the people of Aurora and it is not fiscally responsible, then we shouldn't be undertaking it and the prime examples are the Hallmark Lands, the armoury, and the way Library Square is going. I am all for doing initiatives, but we have got to do it right. When we gave away the armoury, we had to create a community space and we're now putting an awkward addition onto the Cultural Centre and the cost is a staggering \$26 million. You're going to have to pay for that. I am going to have a simple solution and it won't cost the taxpayers any money."

Former MPP Chris Ballard was up next, who said he wanted to take up the entire time allotted to his answer to address what he described as "one of the biggest lost opportunities" on the books: increasing GO Train Service to Aurora.

"It is more than just moving people from Aurora to jobs in Toronto," said Mr. Ballard. "When you get to half hour GO Train service, jobs move, good jobs move from Toronto to Aurora. I have been talking to officials in Aurora for many years about the fact that we need to plan for that half hour service. We need to make sure we have zoning in place. Perhaps one of the biggest initiatives in this Town in the past 100 years will be the redevelopment of the whole train station area. We're not ready for it. I look to the community just to the north of us [and] they are already knocking on the doors of businesses to get them there when they should be here."

This, however, did not sit well with Mr. Dawe who cited Mr. Ballard's record as MPP, while also making a few announcements on the future of Aurora's downtown core.

"Perhaps the former Minister, when he was at the train station touting the 15 minute GO Service could have addressed some of those issues at that point," said Mr. Dawe. "To the other issues, I don't really know what's on Mr. Abel's website. The HoJo's is indeed a blight on our main street. We have three options: we can buy it, we can expropriate it, or we could partner with someone to do something with it. Those are the options we have. It is private property. We put people in touch with Howard Johnson owner many times. As a matter of fact, the deal fell apart just about two or three weeks ago because of an inability of the owner to come up with something that was actually realistic for doing that. If Council would like to join me and move forward on expropriation, I would be most happy to do that."

Last up was Tom Mrakas, who questioned what Mr. Abel thought was "rushing" on Library Square and other ongoing developments in Aurora's Cultural Precinct.

"I am not sure what we're rushing through. I am going to speak specifically with regards to Library Square. Everyone in this room knows that Library Square and that area has been close to 20 years in decision making. Everyone says Let's Do something About it but nothing ever got done. We actually got something done. That's what we did," he said.

"Councillor Thompson and I brought forward a motion in looking at getting rid of those two old buildings that were going to cost over \$4 million just to bring them to code. We needed to get them down, start from scratch, create vibrant, community gathering space that the community could come down and we can start the revitalization of the downtown core, which is another thing people have been talking about for 15 years. Every election we hear it. Nothing ever gets done. We have actually started it, we have actually

got it done, I don't think doing something after 20 years is rushing.?