

Candidates undecided over retail weed wars



By Brock Weir

Recreational cannabis will be legalized across the country this Wednesday, October 17 and as the historic day approaches, local candidates are on the fence with just how retail weed sales should be handled in Aurora in the future.

When the Federal Government announced its intentions to legalize recreational marijuana, the then Provincial Government under Liberal leader Kathleen Wynne said recreational pot sales would be handled by a Provincial sales model similar to the LCBO.

This idea, however, was scuttled by incumbent Progressive Conservative Premier Doug Ford shortly after his June election, who said control would be loosened to allow for retail sales.

The move raised many questions for municipalities and law enforcement bodies, and they are questions that linger on the campaign trail.

At a recent all-candidates' meeting, mayoral candidates John Abel, Chris Ballard, Geoff Dawe and Tom Mrakas were asked whether Aurora would allow marijuana sales in the community, or attempt to opt out of retail sales. In a heated campaign, it was one issue where all candidates agreed to some degree: more information is needed before they can make a firm commitment.

"This is an incredible milestone that we're going through," said Mr. Abel, the first candidate to respond to the question, noting the legalization of marijuana was a Federal issue that was passed down to the Province and now onto the municipality. "First of all, the impact of this law is going to have a tremendous cost associated, just alone, at the York Regional Police who indicated that they have to do testing on the roads and it is going to require a lot more resources on their part. I do believe that we have to wait and consult with our law enforcement and listen to the direction the Province is giving us because it feels we're kind of open-ended to this question.

"I am certainly in favour of the benefits medicinal marijuana has for those who have challenges and the positive impact to the quality of life medicinal marijuana does. Recreational and how it is going to be enforced and distributed at the retail level, I think we should be counting on our upper tier level governments, the province, to give us some guidelines and to definitely work with our law enforcement and, most importantly, to engage with the residents here on their thoughts of how we go forward and how they would like us to proceed."

Mr. Mrakas was next to tackle this question, adding that "due diligence" must be done before the municipalities have to decide on their options on June 22.

"So far, it has been a moving target by this Province," he said, referring to the shifting policies between the Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments, and adding the new Provincial Government has not yet clarified whether municipalities will benefit from tax revenue on marijuana sales. "If the municipality opts out, will they be opting out of tax revenue? They still haven't clearly stated that, yes or no. At the end of the day, what they have come out with in the last couple of days was the fact they would be going the same route as smoking. You will see people smoking marijuana on the streets similar to if they were smoking a cigarette and at the end of the day you have to look at it from the point of view that if they are smoking it and they are walking the streets, is it really going to make a difference if there is a store there? But, at the same time, we have to look at the tax revenue and what is going to happen with that tax revenue.

?I think that we do have to do that due diligence. We do have to wait for the Province to finally [bring in] regulations and the next Council will be making that decision on whether to opt in or opt out. I think it is an important one we need to look at and make sure that we do it right. I think right now it is irresponsible for any one of us sitting up here to give a decision on whether we should opt in or opt out without knowing all the facts.?

If elected mayor on October 22, Mr. Mrakas said he would invite the York Regional Police to the new Council's orientation session to voice their concerns, thereby allowing local lawmakers to make an informed decision.

Mr. Ballard had a similar view, stating that it is the job of Municipal leaders to pull the facts and figures together.

?Ultimately, we're the people around this table who will vote, but I need to hear from Aurorans: how do they want to see this issue play out in their community?? said Mr. Ballard. ?My commitment to you is to make sure we have a fulsome consultation so that you can say, yes or no and under what conditions. I think it is a moving target right now. We heard as the regulations were being released that you could smoke marijuana wherever you could smoke a cigarette. That, I believe, is being walked back. There has been a hew and cry from people who don't want their kids exposed to cigarette smoke, and they certainly don't want their kids exposed to marijuana smoke. I would have been more open to an LCBO type store where the product is controlled under vigorous standards, identification standards.

?First and foremost, we need to hear from the folks of Aurora: what do you want? Where do you want this? How would we control this? More information needs to come out. The government has released its regulations but people will be commenting on those regulations and until we know exactly where it lands, I can't say yes or no right now. I have sat down with (York Regional Police) Chief Jolliffe and senior command and I know the price to not only policing in this community throughout York Region but also the judiciary. I understand the impacts of what is coming down the pipe. We need to be very careful, but it is what Aurora citizens want that will drive where my vote goes.?

Geoff Dawe also cited the work that is being done by the York Regional Police to voice their concerns, among them being the cost to administer roadside tests to determine whether a driver is impaired from marijuana. Breathalyzer tests for alcohol, he said, are less than a dollar to administer while the cannabis test is closer to \$20. These, he said, are ?huge ramifications.?

?I too have heard from residents and I have been overwhelmingly informed that people are not in favour of retail cannabis sales,? he said. ?I myself am not in favour of the private retail world. I think in having my discussions with the YRP on a regular basis, I meet with the chief on a regular basis, there are many, many issues that need to be addressed and they have not yet been addressed. Some of the issues [are] if it is available at the same place as cigarettes are available, we know there are consistently underage cigarette buying. I have serious concerns about that.

?If you look at what municipalities get from tobacco revenues and/or liquor revenues, that is probably what we'll end up with from cannabis revenues, which is pretty much nothing. Most of that revenue has to go into enforcement. If we do get that money, it will have to go into enforcement because we will get requirements for additional enforcement because we will be getting the additional complaints here. I am extremely concerned with the process and I am looking forward to seeing what the regulations will be because the devil is in the details, the details are in the regulations.?