

Candidates vie to capitalize on sports tourism opportunities



By Brock Weir

Sports tourism can be a key to revitalize Aurora, according to candidates who descended upon the Royal Canadian Legion last week for the final All-Candidates' meeting before Monday's municipal election.

With both of Aurora's mayoral candidates in attendance for the session, as well as 27 of the 28 Council candidates (Alice Lalas was not in attendance), many touted their vision on how sports and sports tourism can have a ripple effect in Aurora not only bringing in people to boost Aurora businesses, but also support a new hotel for the area.

Sponsored by Sport Aurora, the largest sporting umbrella group in Town representing a wide variety of sports and activities, candidates were quizzed by a panel based on their respective platforms on sports and rec which were submitted to, and published, by the group ahead of the event.

With incumbent Geoff Dawe facing one of the first questions, he asked the 'next steps' in furthering Aurora's efforts towards sports tourism.

'It is a great way to generate revenue and activity for our Town,' said Mr. Dawe, noting his own daughters' participation in dance, which often involved restaurant and hotel trips. 'It is just good business to try and attract some of that business to Aurora. It gets more engagement from our community and it is just a lot of fun.'

A similar question was fielded to incumbent Council candidate Michael Thompson, zeroing in on the future of a hotel in Aurora, and what a Councillor can do to make that happen.

Part of that formula is to develop a sports tourism strategy to identify key teams and events and build a proper economic case to develop facilities, responded Mr. Thompson, noting that in order for a hotel to become a reality, it needs to be sustainable.

'We all know there is a huge economic benefit,' said Mr. Thompson. 'Sports tourism is one of the fastest growing market segments of tourism out there. In addition, it is about having those facilities that meet those needs. I know there has been a lot of discussion about a 50 metre pool and we continue to look at the alternatives and ways we can bring that to a reality. Is it an Aurora-only solution? Is it engaging our N6 partners and looking at an aquatic facility that serves the greater area?'

While candidates highlighted different areas where sport could receive a boost, some added there needs to be some wider

perspective. For candidate David Heard, sports tourism brought to mind the connection between tourism, creativity, and volunteers, and that combination should be a template for bringing sports together as a whole.

Consensus was the watchword for candidate Roy Cohen, who argued "absolute synergies" among local organizations.

"We're working to make this community whole and more importantly we're working on our youth," he said. "They are the cornerstones, they are our future. As my wife says, a guy like me is rounding third base. I am looking after the kids and that is what this is all about " good debates and good conversations are really healthy. We need facilities desperately. It is not about economics, it is not about dollars, it is about our community."

Some candidates disagreed, however, arguing that one followed the other.

"This reminds me of a Christmas wish list where we all want everything [but] where is the money?" asked Anthony Pullano. "We can talk but where are the visionaries and business people to drive this ahead? We all know [we need] these sports facilities. We all know that it is good for our young people. We all know it is good for our health, but nothing has been done about it in the past."

Looking at a wider-ranging economic perspective on how to bring in sports tourism dollars, many candidates put forward the view that the way forward was bringing a Sports Tourism Development Officer into Town Hall, in a similar vein to their Economic Development Officer.

"But I think there is a real need for someone to champion Sport Aurora and the other recreational programs we have, champion with Council and with Sport Aurora and with Parks and Rec and I see that as a central point of contact for someone to help move our programs forward," said candidate Carl Barrett.

Mr. Thompson said he agreed, noting that the upcoming review of Aurora's Parks and Recreation Master Plan would be a perfect time to review strategy.

"The first step really is to have that information so we can figure out how best to move forward. I think by starting [that process] and creating that vision and the goal then we'll know what we're talking about because if we don't know where we're going we won't know when we have reached it."

However it shakes down, whether it is a Sports Tourism Development Officer or a revamped master plan, for Tom Plamondon everything should be considered with an eye for business.

"There has to be a business element to it. I have been in this community for 20 years and I look at the now vacant hotel sitting on Yonge Street and I think we have to look at why that failed. Why did that facility fail? I think we have to learn from that. As Council we have to take a step back before we can take a step forward and I think the viability of a hotel in this community in supporting sports has to have a business component to it as well."