

Elliott faces tough questions in riding debut



By Brock Weir

It was supposed to be a mere formality, her first event in Newmarket-Aurora before she is formally declared the riding's Progressive Conservative candidate in the June 7 election.

But, for many local PC supporters, the intended celebration was marred by the presence of controversial former candidate Charity McGrath.

PC members gathered at the Newmarket Legion on Thursday evening to cheer on former MPP Christine Elliott ahead of her acclamation as party's nominee.

It hadn't been a smooth road to that point. The nomination in Aurora's north riding only became vacant last month when, dogged by controversy and accusations of signing up fraudulent memberships, Charity McGrath was ousted by the party under the leadership of Doug Ford.

With her nomination overturned by the party and her appeals to stay in the game to contest the nomination once again denied, Ms. McGrath's presence was a surprise ? even an unwelcome one ? to many people in the crowd.

?It has been a little bit of a

rollercoaster ride,? PC riding association president Bill Ballantyne told the crowd. ?I think we can all agree on that, but the strength and resilience of these volunteers that make up our executive and Board of Directors, I must acknowledge them tonight, give them thanks for the quality of the people they are, for their determination to weather the storm, inspire each other, and encourage our former candidate.?

Mr. Ballantyne then segued into the former candidate herself.

?As a minister,? he continued, ?I must insist that I give honour to whom honour is due. I would like to thank and honour our former candidate for this riding, Charity McGrath. She is a woman full of integrity, an esteemed woman, a mother, a wife who has worked very hard in our community, has worked many hours serving those in need, and we give thanks to you, Charity.?

Less inclined to think there was an ?honour? due was party member Rick Metcalfe, who made his feelings clear in the middle of Mr. Ballantyne's speech.

Speaking to The Auroran after the introduction ? and after he approached Ms. Elliott to tell her he believed Ms. McGrath was trying to ?sewer? the riding ? he said he is ?concerned? over Ms. McGrath's portrayal as a ?friend? of the riding and ?stepping aside? to clear the way for Ms. Elliott.

?Here she is tonight and she's trying to make like she is a big friend of the riding,? said Mr. Metcalfe. ?She has no connection to the riding whatsoever. She got caught, the party saw that, overturned her nomination, and yet here she is tonight and I question what her real means are being here tonight when she is somewhat in disgrace with the party.?

Asked to compare Ms. McGrath's community roots to those of the former Whitby-Oshawa MPP, he said, Ms. Elliott is coming to the riding with the aim to represent constituents.

A similar view was offered by party member George Gonsalves, who said, "[Ms. McGrath] was a candidate who obtained her nomination through surreptitious means and certainly now we have a normalization of the situation and she is here and I don't know why. I think [Ms. Elliott distancing herself from Ms. McGrath] would be a very good idea."

Ms. Elliott was also confronted by Newmarket resident Lisa Heckbert over allegations of fraudulent party memberships. Ms. Heckbert pressed the candidate-to-be to address the issues of a Newmarket senior who claims she was signed up without her knowledge.

"I will have to speak to her directly," said Ms. Elliott, noting she couldn't comment on other cases. "There is a lot of gossip out there. I only speak to actual facts."

Amidst this distraction, Ms. Elliott did accomplish her mission in introducing herself to her prospective constituents.

"Thank you for allowing me to stand as your candidate for the Progressive Conservative party here in the wonderful riding of Newmarket-Aurora," Ms. Elliott told the crowds. "It is absolutely an honour for me to be able to do so and I have been spending some time in the riding. It is absolutely wonderful, both Newmarket and Aurora are wonderful communities and I look forward to learning more as time goes on."

"You have all been so welcoming to me. So many people have welcomed me with support, with kindness, with welcoming words. It really means a lot to me and I want to be able to show you in return how much it does mean to me and to work with you in the upcoming election. Many of you have already offered to provide assistance. And I know you know this riding like the back of your hand. Please know that I am going to be more than grateful to receive your assistance, help, advice and counsel so we can be sure that we can be successful on June 7."

As a candidate, Ms. Elliott said she would work very hard to turn the riding blue again, but despite the PCs currently leading the polls, she cautioned there is no time to be complacent.

"Even though we know that success seems certain, that we are going to win government, we have seen this before and we know that it is not going to be as easy as the polls would indicate right now," she said. "Polls are going to tighten up but we will be ready for it. As time goes on, we're going to show that the Liberals are making promises they cannot fulfil. They're offering free almost everything right now. We can't afford it, we know that, and we need to be able to demonstrate that to people."