

Mayoral contenders square off in first all-candidates meeting of campaign

Affordable housing and homelessness were top-of-mind issues for the three candidates vying to be Aurora's next Mayor at the first all-candidates meeting of the 2022 municipal election campaign.

Hosted by the Aurora Public Library over Zoom, the virtual meeting was a chance for residents to hear from just about every candidate in the running to be on Council in Wards 1 ? 6, but also the Town's three mayoral candidates: Phiona Durrant, Anna Lozyk Romeo, and incumbent Tom Mrakas.

Following a chance for each candidate for Mayor and Council to introduce themselves through opening remarks, a Question & Answer session featuring queries submitted by local residents were posed to Durrant, Lozyk Romeo and Mrakas by Reccia Mandelcorn, the Library's Manager of Community Collaboration.

First up was, "What will each of you do to help homelessness in our community?"

"Ultimately it's a problem and I think a lot of people don't realize that we do have homelessness within the Town of Aurora," said Mrakas, the first candidate invited to respond. "We have been working with York Region at providing an [emergency] men's shelter and developing it within the Town. That work is continuing. We're going to look at a proper location? so we can provide housing and ensure that all residents of our community don't end up homeless within the Town of Aurora, and not only Aurora, but all of York Region. That work is continuing, we're going to push forward with that, and we're going to look at ways we can increase attainable housing and affordable housing within our community."

Durrant, responding next, said homelessness looks like all of us.

"When we're talking about building a shelter, we're forgetting that homelessness doesn't mean we're going to just make this building and push people there? and that's the solution," she said. "We have a community where we ignore the fact that homelessness means people are leaving and sleeping on the couch next door. They can't afford their rent. Just last year, I had to help a family who had been evicted from their apartment; a single mom with four kids, so homelessness is not a fairy tale. It's happening here. It goes beyond the checking of the boxes?. I want to make sure my voice reaches Regional Council [to] advocate in the Region and work with elected Councillors to make real action."

Responding last, Lozyk Romeo agreed that homelessness is a serious issue that is being exacerbated by rising prices.

"We also have to work with the Region and also the other municipalities [to see] what they're doing to help," she said. "We have to work collaboratively. One of the things we have in Aurora right now is we have a transition place we're building on Yonge Street? so we're doing something. Homelessness in Aurora is visible. There are people in the bus stops we see every day and what are we going to do about it? As a municipality, we need to work with our staff to ensure we have local shelter providers and work with the Region and other levels of government."

Key in ending homelessness is having a place for people to live, and the next question looked at the other piece of the puzzle: "What steps will you take to ensure good affordable housing for low- and middle-income individuals and families?"

Lozyk Romeo, the last to respond to the first question, was the first to tackle this issue and said it's a "loaded question."

"I have been watching what's actually been coming to Aurora and? we don't have anything that came in terms of planning applications, there's nothing that's affordable," she said. "The houses start at \$1 million and I really think we have done nothing when it comes to the affordability. I think in this next term we need to focus on the next applications coming in to see if we can do something with the developers and we can work with them, and even looking at different land opportunities to see if we can place, develop and meet affordable housing; but in Aurora it's difficult, just the way we introduce the housing to Aurora. We moved to

Aurora because it was much cheaper, but now I can move back to where I lived because it is much cheaper."

Mrakas countered the assertion that "nothing" had been done, citing the work carried out collaboratively between Aurora and other municipalities.

"Through our OP, we're developing policies that look at providing a diverse housing stock in areas of our Town," he said. "This is a question that doesn't just lie in Aurora, it lies across all municipalities in York Region and, quite frankly, in the GTHA. We have been working with the Small Urban Mayors of the GTHA and we have been working collaboratively on these issues working with the Premier, working with all levels of government because it's not going to just take us and our policies, we need all levels of government to work together to make sure that the housing in our municipality is developed in a way that is attainable and affordable not only for our younger generations to be able to stay within our municipality, but also for our seniors to be able to age in place.

"This is very important and we're working through that through our OP and making sure we implement what is important in our community but ultimately too we need to work with the Province to make sure they make reforms to the Tribunal so that when we make decisions they're the decisions that are right for our community to make sure we have that housing. I will also add that we have approved a full building over at Leslie and Wellington where we've partnered with Housing York and is going to provide 300 units below market rate, which is going to be very affordable for every resident in this community to come and take advantage of. We're looking forward to that development occurring."

Last up was Durrant, who said changes need to be made.

"There are 83 per cent of people that [have] said, "When they start to build a family, they want a home, not an apartment," she said. "We have a plan, a Town plan that, yes I want to adhere to as mayor when elected, but when there are great ideas that come in, we want to make sure that changes are made accordingly. Do you understand that we can have buildings where they can afford not just because of that; the Region in February of 2021 I think stated a Town should give two acres every five years for [affordability] and all other communities have responded with an action plan towards that. Please ask Tom what have we done and what's our answer for that?"

Further opportunities need to be explored with Habitat for Humanity, she added, and ensuring that the "missing middle" is prioritized over large in-fill housing developments.

"There's a lot we can do," she said. "We just need a leader like me who cares."

NEXT WEEK: Environmental issues and development.

By Brock Weir
Editor
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter