

Mrakas promises 'more liveable community' in first address as Mayor



By Brock Weir

Aurorans want a 'more vibrant, more liveable community' that respects our past while also looking ahead to the future, according to Mayor Tom Mrakas in his inaugural address last Tuesday night, which set addressing the issue of stable neighbourhoods as priority number one.

Mayor Mrakas, along with Councillors Harold Kim, Wendy Gaertner, Sandra Humfries, Michael Thompson, Rachel Gilliland and John Gallo were formally sworn in as the 2018 - 2022 Aurora Council before a packed Council Chamber on December 4.

The next four years, said Mayor Mrakas, represent a 'pivotal point in Aurora's history' that will take fitting together several important puzzle pieces to achieve collective goals. Among those puzzle pieces are addressing the needs of Aurora's so-called stable neighbourhoods, addressing the issues of affordable and accessible housing, traffic solutions that address growth, and fiscal responsibility.

'I am profoundly humbled by the honour of representing our community and I am confident we will work hard to deserve that trust you have placed in us,' said Mayor Mrakas. 'Tonight represents the sum total of the hard work, the hopes, the dreams not only of the representatives you see before you, but the residents we represent. Every one of us here tonight has a mission for Aurora.'

'Throughout the campaign, each candidate shared their vision and, by your vote, you have chosen us and given us a mandate to bring that vision to life. We recognize that it will be our ability to work towards that realization of that shared vision of Aurora that will mark the success of this term of Council. That future begins tonight.'

The work ahead, he said, will build on much of the groundwork laid by the last term of Council which has made Aurora 'now positioned to move forward on important initiatives that will be key community builders in years to come.' These initiatives include the development of Library Square and the renovation of the historic Aurora Armoury, each of which he said will be important building blocks in revitalizing the Downtown Core.

'Heritage buildings are very important to our community and our residents, and businesses expect us to do what we can to protect our history,' he said. 'Smart and appropriate growth, development that is in keeping with the vision we have for our community, is the key to a thriving and sustainable community. I will work with Council to ensure the planning decisions we make are focused on providing big city amenities and services while maintaining Aurora's small-town charm and green spaces for our future generations.'

'There are many other important pieces to the puzzle to get us where we want to go: a better community for everyone. Improving the liveability of our community is a key part of community building. Our neighbourhoods are where we call home and it is very important to all of us, but our stable neighbourhoods are under increased pressure due to the demand of development.'

'There is widespread concern about inappropriate infill development that does not fit in or keep with the character of our community, and a blanket statement of 'no monster homes' isn't a plan; more needs to be done and that is why one of the first issues this Council will address is a strategy to address that issue of stable neighbourhoods. Work is already underway as the consultant's report is due in January and I commit to ensuring that we respect our past in our decision-making.'

The issue of affordable and accessible housing are to that work hand in hand with protecting stable neighbourhoods and heritage buildings, he added. Seniors want to stay in the community in which they built their lives and, at the same time, young families want

to put down their roots. Therefore, he said, a "diversity of housing options" such as bungalows and purpose-built rentals is a community need.

"We have the tools to improve the accessibility of housing in Aurora and we will use them," he said.

Tools to address the issues of traffic and transit are often seen to be in the hands of other levels of government, primarily at the Regional and Provincial levels, but Mayor Mrakas said Council is committed to working with these higher levels to come up with key solutions to get people moving.

Being able to move around "whether on the roads or trails, whether in cars, on foot, or while cycling" is an integral component of a "liveable community," but a liveable community is also based on "the foundation of sound financial planning and management." Mayor Mrakas told the assembled audience that Aurora's financial health is "good" and Council will "prioritize fiscal responsibility in all its decisions."

The establishment of a Financial Advisory Committee in the last term was an important step towards this, one which the Mayor said implemented the policy of setting Aurora's tax rate at inflation plus one per cent to keep municipal reserves healthy. The benefit of this, he added, is Aurorans can anticipate what their tax rate will be and will not get caught off-guard "by a massive tax hike."

"But, there is still a lot of work to be done; we need to continue to grow our reserves while, at the same time, looking at ways to provide the best services in the most cost-effective way without raising taxes," he said, before touching on efforts this Council will make towards another economic driver: sports tourism.

With new hotels under construction, Aurora will have "leverage" to create a "strong, diverse sports community that will bring in tourism." At the same time, Aurora will need to be "creative" in how it upgrades existing facilities while working with sports partners to create what he described as "a true centre of excellence, appropriately located to ensure maximum usage."

"Aurora will always be in good company, but we need to do more," said Mayor Mrakas, after saying the "time is now" to act on moving forward with a ward system of government. "We need to grow as leaders in York Region and the GTA and that starts right here at this Council table, how we as a Council table work together on your behalf. As we said before, hard work and great ideas aren't enough to get things done. To get from vision to reality, you need to build support for your ideas and you get support by giving support. That requires two critical elements: collaboration and communication. Collaboration isn't an empty buzzword, it is an effective tool to get things done. It doesn't mean we're always going to agree. That's impossible. Nor is it desirable. If we all thought the same way all the time, how would we ever innovate? Respectful, considered, informed debate, is what the residents can expect from this Council.

"As your mayor, I will provide the collaborative leadership in community-focused, common sense solutions that you expect. We were all elected to work in the best interests of Aurora; that is the core principle that our residents expect will guide our every decision. If we collectively and individually consider every issue within that context, add to that capacity, residents might not always agree with our decisions, but will respect the integrity of our decision-making process and that, to me, will be a success.

"Together, we will take action to find solutions that represent the challenges and move forward with the innovative possibilities to realise our opportunities. Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, we take our first step toward a shared, positive future. I say to you and your fellow Council members: Let's get to work."