

Transparency and visions of future dominate questions from voters

By Brock Weir

If a poll were taken of issues that mattered to the hundreds who turned out at Sunday's all-candidates' meeting, transparency at Town Hall and planning for the future would top the list if questions from residents were any indication.

In their opening remarks, mayoral candidates Geoff Dawe and John Gallo both cited transparency, but their comments left some residents wanting more on just what that meant to them.

Responding to one question asking just that, Mr. Dawe said often transparency is 'in the eye of the beholder', as has often been the case during this last term of Council.

'Transparency is being as open with your decisions and the reasoning beyond your decision as possible,' said Mr. Dawe. 'There are certain issues which are [kept behind closed doors] based on the advice of our legal staff [such as] a legal matter or the purchase and sale of land, so we work specifically with our solicitor [to say] what we can disclose and what we can't disclose. We need to disclose everything that is possible.'

Mr. Gallo expressed a similar view, but said there have been cases where, in his view, that disclosure did not go far enough, particularly when it comes to the issues surrounding the vacant land on Mavrinac Boulevard and the potential to turn it into a park.

'There were discussions behind closed doors about what to do with the park and I advised Council that no matter what discussion we had, what direction we take, we need to 'in a meaningful way' communicate to the residents of that community that things are changing. We didn't, as a Town.

'I took it upon myself to go door-to-door and I let them know publicly that whatever was public I would let them know and I advised them that it should be part of the public discussion, part of the public information, part of the debate that we're having at the Council table, and I was happy to see [that residents came] and ended up expressing their opinions [and] that is the kind of thing I would like to continue doing.'

Transparency was once again brought back to the fore in the third to last question, which asked the Councillors to expand on their points of transparency, while comparing their visions for Aurora's future.

Transparency is essential, concluded Mr. Dawe, but in conjunction with not only the Town's legal department, but between all Council members.

'Mavrinac is an issue we all struggled with,' said Mr. Dawe. 'We are now in legal fees and legal battles over that that may have been avoided if we had managed to actually work together between Council and staff to organize that. Sometimes we have to step back from what we want to rush out to do. Sometimes we have to step back from that and [ask], 'What is the long-term good?' Sometimes it is not just coming right out front and saying we have to do this. Sometimes you have to hold back [and ask] how we can work this out so we're not involved in legal fees and we're not involved in another freaking court case.'

In contrast, Mr. Gallo countered that if he didn't go out to the public on the Mavrinac matter, they might be in a different position today.

'Unfortunately, I can't speak to some of the interesting conversations and some of the interesting discussions that happened behind closed doors,' said Mr. Gallo. 'At some point I will. At some point the public will know exactly what happened behind closed doors. You can probably read between the lines as best you can. My conscience is clear.'

'Fortunately, Council in its wisdom supported the residents in purchasing that property at 2002 prices as opposed to market value, which was first put to the Council table and it was me that found the error and made sure the public knew, not through a public

planning process, which is what Council wanted to do, but through public engagement.?

Looking ahead to the future, some members of the public wanted to know more about how a vote for each candidate would impact them down the line. Comparing and contrasting Aurora's Strategic Plan, which provides a framework for the Town moving ahead to 2031, versus Mr. Gallo's 10-point Imagine Aurora Plan, which covers Aurora through 2030, some noted the similarities between the plans and how each would ultimately benefit the community.

?The biggest change that is going to happen [in that time] is that when we look at intensification down Yonge Street, that is one huge area that will change Aurora, and I also think we will be seeing intensification down the west side of the railway tracks where some of that land turns into residential,? said Mr. Dawe. ?We are fortunate in Aurora we have 40 per cent green space. A lot of that is dictated by Moraine policies, so we are in a very unique situation of physically not having a lot of substantial changes in how we look. I would like to see some changes down Yonge Street in terms of how traffic is handled to make that a far more user-friendly environment and I think that would promote some of the businesses that are down there.?

Contrasting his plan with the Strategic Plan, Mr. Gallo said he believed the process in developing the Strategic Plan was lacking in public participation.

?I was an active participant in it and supported it,? he said. ?I went door-to-door. I went into people's homes and I asked them what they were concerned of, what we were doing right, what are we doing wrong, and I met with thousands of residents. [My plan] is developed based on those communications.

?Some of it is in the Strategic Plan, some of it isn't, and there are new and innovative ways of looking at the Town of Aurora and how we deal with our issues. I have said time and time again that one of the key things is communication. I have shown that in my actions, not only during this election period but for the past six years that I have been on Council.?