

VOTE 2014: Council candidate Tom Mrakas looks for new ways to keep Aurora growing and moving



By Brock Weir

Tom Mrakas has long had a ringside seat to politics here in Aurora.

For four years, his wife, Alison Collins-Mrakas, served as Councillor from 2006 ? 2010 before continuing her political involvement through her column in *The Auroran*, and he has seen how things work firsthand. Now, however, he wants to get truly into the thick of it himself, throwing himself into the ring as a Council candidate for the October 27 Municipal Election.

While Ms. Collins-Mrakas was sitting either at the table, or in the public gallery at Town Hall, Mr. Mrakas, a contractor and painter by trade, felt some degree of frustration on not being able to throw in his own two-cents ? effectively, that is ? on matters that were before the Town.

?I am tired of screaming at the TV, first of all,? he says with a laugh on why he entered the race. ?Secondly, I figure I can't criticise unless I throw my name into the hat and decide to put myself in the position to make decisions. I think the best way to go about it is to run for Council and bring my ideas forward as a small businessman.?

There wasn't any one particular issue that caused him to jump up and down from the comfort of his own living room, he says. Rather, a degree of dissatisfaction with how decisions were being made, spurred him into the game.

?My point of view is to just make a decision and stop referring it,? he says. ?Unless you have absolutely no idea what is going on, there is no reason to refer. You have the information in front of you to make a decision and I think that is what the people want ? to have people there making decisions instead of letting staff do all the decision-making.?

Case in point, he says, were the hours of staff and Council time devoted last year to three trees in the area of a private homeowner's backyard, and arguments from neighbours ? and from Councillors ? to protect them after an outcry from residents. Mr. Mrakas says he saw that as a practical issue of grading that someone with his own professional background could have provided valuable, and practical, input.

That, however, has been dealt with and is a matter for the history books. Looking ahead, there will have to be efforts to work with builders and developers towards what Mr. Mrakas describes as ?smart growth? including green initiatives on the inside and outside of new homes, and taking an active hand in guiding ?the way we want Aurora to look like in the future.?

‘If we put things in place and we attract people that we want to be here, I think that is the best way to do it,’ he says. ‘If you are giving incentives for certain businesses and certain developments, then it is going to help everywhere. Right now, the downtown is a ghost town. Go there on a Sunday and no one is there. Everyone is just driving through.’

Keeping people moving, on the other hand, is part of his vision for another area of Town, particularly at the Aurora GO Station. A regular observer of what he calls ‘the Frogger dance’ of people trying to cross the street, seemingly running for their lives as soon as they get off the train, he says he would like to explore the possibility of building a ‘skywalk’ for pedestrians.

‘That way the traffic can continuously flow and you can continue to walk over safely,’ he says. ‘Right now, as it stands, you either have to walk over to Industrial Parkway or you have to walk over to Wells Street and cross the street.’

For Aurora voters who might be more familiar with his wife, Mr. Mrakas says they do have some key differences. While she is more policy driven, he sees many shades of grey in issues, he says, particularly when it comes to environmental matters. He finds inspiration in people who have given back to their communities from all political stripes, making a difference in the places they want to live.

‘This is where we live,’ he says of municipal politics. ‘Whether it is how many bags of garbage we’re picking up or the emerald ash borer, it is important to us because it is Aurora. That’s how it keeps me involved, and every little bit affects every single one of us. That is why it should be important to everyone.’