

And then there were nine -- lessons from the Council vacancy process

By Brock Weir

For Aurora's newly re-minted Councillor Don Constable, being back at the table was just like riding a bike.

After putting himself forward to replace Chris Ballard earlier in July, Councillor Constable's whirlwind day included his pitch to Council in the late afternoon on why he should join them at the table and, following an hour or so to let the news sink in, he was able to join Mayor Dawe and the remaining seven Councillors at the table that very evening.

'We have no presentations, but we had an interesting one this afternoon whereby we selected a new member of the public to sit as a Councillor for the remainder of the term,' said Mayor Dawe at the start of the July 29 meeting, for viewers in the audience 'both in the Chamber and on television' that might have recognized a new face sitting in Councillor Paul Pirri's seat, as the latter Councillor moved to the opposite side of the table in keeping with electoral order.

'We look forward to your input' and the rest of us are very jealous because Councillor Constable brought his own cheering section tonight.'

Councillors were enthusiastic in their welcome, and were full of positivity not just for Councillor Constable, but for the other 17 Aurora residents who put their names forward ahead of July 29 for consideration of the vacancy.

'The candidates did a great job,' said Councillor Sandra Humfries. 'It took a lot of courage and putting themselves out there for the community.'

'Welcome, as well,' added Councillor Wendy Gaertner. 'I am really thanking all of the people who were part of the public process. I know it was a difficult process for many people and I appreciate the participation.'

In response, Councillor Constable was brief in his remarks.

'I am just happy to be here and I am looking forward to working with all of you,' he said.

With a special shout out to his 'honoured guests out there [in the audience] in the cheap seats', further remarks, in public session, anyway, were limited.

As Councillor Constable prepares for his second Council meeting of his abridged term this week, voters might have a clearer picture on some of the issues ahead. Each candidate's pitch and subsequent questions from Council shone some light on what Aurora might expect not just from Councillor Constable, but the three candidates who have also put themselves forward for consideration for the municipal election this October.

Key projects and initiatives are often brought to Council recommended in the interests of providing 'an exceptional quality of life for all', an objective in Aurora's Strategic Plan. As this point has been a particular thorn in Councillor Evelyn Buck's side since the plan was adopted, she questioned Councillor Constable on what this meant to him, and whether that 'quality of life' should come at the expense of the taxpayer.

'As members of Council, and a taxpayer, we have the opportunity to certainly find out how our community should be strategized [for] what we do need,' he replied. 'There is nobody better to know than members of Council, staff, and fellow taxpayers. It could be something we would have to work together at.'

Councillor Buck continued her questions with Svetla Topouzova, who has been a long-time advocate for preservation of Aurora's natural and built heritage. She asked the candidate whether there is room in Aurora for growth, whether as 'a tourist centre or a university city.'

For Ms. Topouzova, it was all about keeping doors open.

"I would love to see Aurora with more doors open, open for more visitors and tourists," she said. "Having said that, I do believe that preserving the mature trees and the parks in Aurora will only contribute to this concept."

While most of the discussions that followed in the subsequent Council meeting focused on initiatives that could improve Aurora's downtown core, there was a prelude to that discussion when candidate James Hoyes came to the podium. Questioned by Councillor Buck on whether he believed the Town and the Aurora United Church should work together on what would be best for the church's corner lot, he said it was important to be mindful.

"I understand it is important to maintain that somehow but I understand the Churches are limited in the funds they have, so something has to be worked out," he said. "I believe we do need to maintain the history in that corner. I am not willing to write a cheque, but I am willing to look at the options to see what is best for this Town because I believe this Town has a historical significance."

At the end of the day, however, it was left for candidate Harold Kim to get his hands dirty on the question of sewage. When asked by Councillor Buck of his thoughts on building a trunk sewer up to Lake Simcoe, Mr. Kim said it was important to look not only at environmental impacts, but also budget constraints, and finding partners to help carry the burden.

"Those people whose properties are adjacent to the trunk path should have a say. At the same time, you have to look at the broader picture. With everything you have to be transparent, full disclosure, and let them know the benefits and the risks as well."