

Aurora Votes 2018: Abel aims to undo 'costly' Council decisions



By Brock Weir

John Abel aims to undo 'costly' Council decisions and redirect this money to projects he think will bear more fruit.

Mr. Abel, who currently serves as Aurora's Deputy Mayor, outlined his platform in his bid to unseat incumbent Geoff Dawe to be Aurora's next mayor in October at a campaign launch held Wednesday night at Graystones.

In his speech, he took aim at many of the big ticket decisions that have been made by Council over the last four years, many of which he was a vocal opponent, while outlining his vision for the future.

If elected, Mr. Abel said he would scrap plans for a three storey addition to the Church Street School as part of the Library Square development and break the Town's current contract with Niagara College for the renovation of the historic Aurora Armoury and redirect these funds for a revolving investment fund and the creation of a medical and innovation campus on the Hallmark lands.

'It has something to do with group-think, a particularly pernicious strain of group think,' said Mr. Abel after slamming the Town's deal with Niagara College's Canadian Food & Wine Institute for the use of the Aurora Armoury, a deal which saw the bulk of the details hammered out behind closed doors. Most of the Town Councillors are timid and uncritical. I guess they believe they are doing a good job because they show up regularly for Council meetings, but they don't delve into issues to deepen the understanding and they have trouble formulating opinions of their own. They can be easily led like sheep. The leaders of the Council are much worse. They refuse to conduct due diligence. They refuse to evaluate business cases, they are reckless with other people's money. Yes, they are good and fast talkers, and yes, they often boast about their leadership skills. But, in real life, they act in haste and they never consider the consequences or potential repercussions of their actions, and they do not have the best interests of Aurora at heart. Two of them are running for mayor in October.

'In contrast to my fellow competitors in the race for mayor, I am pragmatic, open and resolved to doing things deliberately and right. I cannot be swayed by special interest groups at the expense of the community I serve. I believe in due diligence. If anyone on Council proposes a costly expenditure, they had damned well better have done their homework, or I will do it for them.

'To all the citizens, the question is this: do you want to continue down this reckless pack of hasty, unjustifiable spending, or do you want to return trust and fiscal responsibility to Aurora's Town Council? If it is the latter, I am your man.'

Among the decisions Mr. Abel deemed 'unjustifiable' was the aforementioned Armoury deal, which he opposed from the outset, the use of 12 acres of land on the former Hallmark site, land previously deemed employment lands, for the construction of two senior baseball diamonds, and the current plans for Library Square.

While he says he still supports the original price tag of \$2.3 million to renovate the Armoury into a cultural hub, he opposes using Aurora's Hydro Funds for anything more than that. Similarly, he opposes spending an estimated \$20 million for a Library Square plan that includes a building addition, instead offering Library Square as a gathering place and using the rest of the space to increase parking.

The Hydro Funds earmarked for those projects, he said, would be better used to start a \$15 million revolving investment fund. This financial vehicle is a well-proven method of gap financing, primarily used for development and expansion of businesses, he said. It is a self-replenishing pool of money, utilizing interest and principle payments of old loans to issue new ones. With this fund, the Town will provide loans for the procurement of properties, partnering with the development of those properties, and sell them at a profit to create local jobs and businesses. The loan would be at a favourable interest rate for a short term. The payments from the loan would then be deposited back into the revolving investment with interests and the profits would go to our reserve. This strategy has already achieved great success with the Town's Leslie Street employment lands and the LED lighting conversion project.

In short, we will invest in Aurora and we will get the most mileage out of the dollars we spend. In an immediate example: we will purchase the Sports Dome with the revolving investment fund and we will pay back the loan with favourable permit fees for the users. Once the loan is paid back, we will own this asset and we will better be able to support our local soccer clubs. If we provide arenas for hockey, then we can certainly provide a dome for our soccer community.

Getting in and around Town was another focus for Mr. Abel, pledging to form an enhanced GO Transit shuttle service for Aurora commuters to get to and from the station, freeing up 300 parking spaces in the process.

Additional facility space for the Aurora Seniors' Centre is also part of his platform, as is windrow removal in the wintertime.

We will make sure that the windrows left by snow plows are removed so people don't get trapped in their driveway, said Mr. Abel to the applause of the crowd, noting that it will be a service paid for by users as needed and a subsidized service for those in the community who can't afford it.

He wants to partner with local school boards on the establishment of after school programs and cultural hubs, redeveloping the Howard Johnson's site, an eyesore he characterised as a signature of Geoff Dawe's inability to address obvious critical issues, develop an affordable housing strategy to curb a brain drain of our educated youth to cities, and develop the Hallmark lands into a medical campus or high-tech incubator that will generate hundreds of jobs and tax revenue for Aurora.

He would also continue efforts for a new multipurpose recreational centre on the Bloomington lands, currently owned by the Province, near Cardinal Carter Catholic High School, but a recreation centre that is completely barrier-free like Durham's Abilities Centre. Soccer and baseball tournaments, he added, would be brought back to the downtown core, by repurposing existing fields and green spaces at Machell and Fleury Parks.

If I am elected Mayor of Aurora, the days of secret negotiations and backroom deals will be over. Openness and transparency will return to Council. We will do our due diligence, evaluate each business case and consider all reasonable options. We will restore fiscal responsibility and trust in our local government and we will always be guided by one overriding principle: to improve the lives of people in Aurora.