

Aurora Votes 2018: Gallo wants to ?fix a system that is somewhat broken?



By Brock Weir

For the past four years, John Gallo has been watching municipal government from a slight distance.

A former council member and mayoral candidate, he used to be in the thick of it, but watching from the sidelines has given him a new perspective, and looking on he has seen a political system he describes as ?broken from the top down.?

Now, he wants to get back into the fray and help fix what he sees as problems.

Mr. Gallo, who ran for mayor in the 2014 municipal election against incumbent Geoff Dawe, is in the race once again, this time vying for one of six Council seats in next month's municipal election.

?Having sat at a distance for the past four years, and also with the four years prior I was on Council, I am not the type of person to sit back and watch things happen, particularly if they are not going how they should be going,? Mr. Gallo told The Auroran, sitting near a shade structure at Thomas Coates Park, informally known as Mavrinac Park. ?I have found there has been a lot of mismanagement, a lot of errors that were made and I am not the type of person to sit back and watch that happen and not do anything about it.?

One of the areas of ?mismanagement? he cites is the development of the Joint Operations Centre on Industrial Parkway North. While he supported the project while he was sitting at the Council table, Mr. Gallo said he supported it only when the budget stood at \$16 million.

?I was in on it and I agreed it needed to be built,? he said. ?It ballooned to \$30+ million and way, way out of control and mismanaged from the financial point.?

He has the same view of renovations done to the Aurora Family Leisure Complex over the course of this outgoing Council term, as well as ongoing renovations to the historic Aurora Armoury to make way for a new campus of Niagara College's Canadian Food & Wine Institute.

?I have been in property management for the past 20 years and I have never seen an agreement like that for a building,? he said.

?The amount of money in terms of lease holder improvements we're pumping into the building seems to be excessive and I just didn't see a good business plan for that. I think the Hallmark Lands are another issue for me. I delegated to Council recommending, suggesting they take those lands and sell them and reinvest in our current assets.

?It was always instilled in me as a Councillor that our employment lands are sacrosanct. You do not change the use, normally. Typically, developers would want you to change the use from commercial/retail to residential. We went a step further to wholesale recreational where there will be zero tax [coming] from that property in perpetuity and I have a big problem with that. That is not the place to be building recreational facilities. It is the place to pat yourself on the back, they did a good job buying a piece of land that increased in value, and you should be taking advantage of that and putting those dollars into our current facilities.?

Current facilities include tennis and basketball courts at Thomas Coates, a greenspace of which Mr. Gallo takes particular pride. As a Council member, he began the process of securing the six acre parcel of land for the Town from developers at terms and prices set in the original subdivision plan after the York Region District School Board nixed its long-term plan to build a school on the site.

Mr. Gallo rallied residents in the area, many of whom said they paid a premium for their properties because it was going to back onto a school, to fight for the Town to reclaim the land for park space.

This model of communication with residents is something Mr. Gallo promises to deliver once again should residents decide to elect him once again.

If elected, he said he would like to bring forward a referendum-like system that would give the public direct input on major decisions that hit the Council table.

"[We need to] make sure we can engage the public, not just neighbourhood by neighbourhood, to make sure people are aware and engaged across Town," he said. "There are some significant things that are happening. While we are built out, infill is going to be a big part of the next little while, particularly in the downtown core. One of my initiatives is to work with developers to influence the construction of hopefully residential apartments. Whatever happens downtown, that is the way I would like to see it move because I strongly believe we need to have people down there, we need to have foot traffic for the business. It is not a novel idea, certainly not something I came up with, but it is certainly something I would champion."

Bringing people into the downtown core is a mantra repeated by proponents of the Library Square development. As a member of the Aurora Cultural Centre Board, Mr. Gallo has been involved in the stakeholder consultations on the project. While he said he likes the idea, and he believes a new building extending the Church Street School is "a really good idea," he said he feels plans are being "rushed" and he would like to "see a solid financial and business plan to justify where the money comes from."

"You're going to find my discussions [this campaign] are going to revolve around kind of fixing a system that is somewhat broken," said Mr. Gallo, who said he's in favour of retaining the current At Large system of government until someone can convince him otherwise. "I find that from the top down. The political system is broken. I think and hope that the residents of Aurora look at the candidates, and while it is clear there are going to be some that they don't know very well or haven't seen [their positions], I would be asking, 'If you're sitting as a Councillor and there is a significant decision you have to make and the Council Chamber is full,' this is where I say the system is broken, unless you have someone who doesn't have weak knees? "and you're there to make a decision for the broader good, making a decision between losing a whole bunch of votes if you vote one way, and if you vote your conscience, and the reports are telling you to do something that is in the good of the entire Town, what do you do?"

"I have always chosen the road of I am going to do what is in the best interests of the Town. People might even point to [Mavrinac] and say, 'I don't know, Gallo, this is pretty local and you fought for this. This doesn't effect the entire Town and you're a bit of a hypocrite saying let's sell Hallmark to get the tax dollars and you didn't want to redevelop and put townhouses or whatever here.' There might be a correlation, but I think it is very different. The people that bought here expected institutional use, a school. How do you tell them that you're going to be backing onto somebody else's home when they bought it not in that light?"

"It is a tough thing when you're sitting there, a tough decision to make. I believe time and time again I stood my ground and I base my decisions on the facts that were before me and in the best interests of the Town. Unfortunately, I have seen it myself that that is not the case with others. They have to justify that themselves."