

Aurora Votes 2018: Van Decker promises Vision, Accountability and New ideas



By Brock Weir

Denis Van Decker has a very simple vision of just what a Council member should be: a 'protector.'

In the context of a municipality, this means, he says, 'protecting rights, protecting the Town's assets and fiscal health, and protecting the environment.'

A vocal critic of the incumbent Council both at both the podium and on social media, Mr. Van Decker is hoping to bring forward the change he would like to see happen, as one of sixteen candidates vying for six seats on the 2018-2022 Aurora Council.

'For some people, their 'Why I love Aurora' is that 'It's a great place to live and I just want to give back to my community,' says Mr. Van Decker. 'It's not that I don't have that, and I am active in many parts of my community [from being] a Knight of Columbus to a soccer coach, have been involved politically on the Green side, but I probably would have lived in the land of sunshine and rainbows and gone on with my business as an entrepreneur'and not done things if I didn't think things could be improved for the positive.'

Mr. Van Decker has lived in Aurora for over 16 years. In that time, he served as the vice chair of the Town's Committee of Adjustment until 2010. With this insight into municipal workings, he says he has seen a 'number of areas for positive improvement' at Town Hall including 'accountability' and 'lesser regulations.'

'Those are the numbers one and two on my platform,' he says. 'I have seen situations where Council and staff don't really know what is happening between them. The JOC (Joint Operations Centre) is one big example and there are many. What is going on with the Armoury, frankly, I don't know all the details but there is enough to cause me concern about things that happened in meetings that were secret (closed meetings) and maybe shouldn't have been secret.'

Over the last two years, Mr. Van Decker and his wife have been waging a public battle with the Town of Aurora's Bylaw Department over accessing their property. It is a battle that has been carried out not only at the Council Chamber's podium, but in the courts as well.

With this in mind, reforming what he describes as 'bylaw litigation' is one of the main things he would like to bring to the Council table, if elected this October.

'There is a whole black hole that effects people to a similar dollar value as these other decisions on an annual basis that we're blind to,' he says. 'The reason why we're blind to it is a concept I call, 'It's In Legal.' The idea of keeping legal conversations confidential I understand. I run a business, I understand corporate law and the idea in a negotiation is you don't want to hurt your position.' But, he contends that Aurora is one of the most 'litigious' municipalities in York Region.

'There was great progress,' says Mr. Van Decker of efforts made at the Council table to restrict bylaw officers' access to private property to be only with a warrant. 'The problem is it is a one-year trial and it could be tossed out again. The underlying law is still there. I want to see clear information about the cost of litigation, which is right now bundled into Corporate Services, and not out in our bylaw department. [I want] reporting on what they're doing, proper costing, [and] change the bylaw to be consistent with the Constitution. It is not that I want to fire people and do all kinds of negative things. I see that all as positives.'

Noting he has seen a 'lack of intellectual vigour' watching Council proceedings, the Council candidate is using his name as a mantra. Here on out, VAN is taking on a whole new meaning, standing for his platform of Vision, Accountability and New Ideas. This platform, he says, has been informed in many ways, from his time as an economic development officer in the Sarnia-Lambton region, to his entrepreneurship in green technologies, to his political involvement, most recently in June's Provincial Election where he stood as a candidate in the 'None of the Above' party (NOTA), which advocates for 'direct democracy.'

While his vision for the role of Councillor is that of a protector, this protection extends to the environment where he says he will keep a close eye on green matters, including the redevelopment of the Collis Leather Tannery property into a community of stacked townhomes. Additional environmental planks in his platform include the creation of dog parks that are walkable from where people live and getting cars off the road through improved transit.

Industrial Parkway, he says, should be emphasised as a transit diversion for York Region Transit, including Viva, and additional turn lanes at Yonge and Wellington should be explored.

'We need to do things with Downtown,' he says. 'Nothing has been done in the Promenade Plan. We missed an opportunity with the stacked townhouses [on the northwest side of the intersection] and I think with diversion to Industrial Parkway we can actually look at this section of Yonge Street being a pedestrian walkway, if we do a major traffic diversion around it.'

As far as accountability goes, he underscores his 'direct democracy' credentials, advocating for referendums on hot issues to keep politicians accountable.

In the same vein, he also advocates for loosening regulations in a number of areas to foster business, including easing up on the Town's sign bylaw.

'In Aurora, we have multiple levels of bureaucracy over and beyond what is really required,' he says. 'There are ways to make that better. I want to work with the region for zero interest loans, local improvement charges, to do energy efficiency and water efficiency projects. It needs a structure from the municipality to set up the loan but it is tied to the tax rolls. It would be immediately cash-flow positive, it would be tied to the house, so it would be seen as a positive all the way around.'

Over his years as a municipal advocate, Mr. Van Decker says he has felt his voice be 'silenced' on numerous occasions. In this regard, he has mixed feelings over whether Aurora should adopt a ward system of government where each Councillor would be elected by 'and represent--- specific segments of the community. If Aurora goes down this route, he says he likes concepts floated by other candidates of each ward having a slice of the downtown core to make sure everyone has a stake in it, but sees a benefit in the current at-large system in that residents have more options to take their concerns.

Adopting the idea of Councillors as full-time positions is something that should be considered, he says, to allow Council members the time to fully immerse themselves in the issues and make the best decisions.

'I don't know how [Council members] let things slide without getting the proper answers, and I think my perseverance to make sure answers are given, to strive for accountability will have positive results on taxpayer dollars,' he says. 'I think creativity will have positive results on taxpayers dollars and on quality of life.'