

Aurora Votes 2022: Increasing community engagement with Council a key priority for mayoral candidate Durrant



Residents sometimes feel uncomfortable speaking up when they have ideas to bring forward, but tackling that and increasing community engagement is a priority Phiona Durrant would like to tackle in her first 100 days in office, should she be elected Mayor on October 24.

Community engagement has been a key theme throughout Durrant's campaign and if she secures victory this month, one of the first things she says she'll look at is offering more residents to provide input from the podium within the Council Chamber.

'In the first 100 days, I would want us to have meetings to give people the opportunity to come in and look at things their Council can commit to and have their voice heard. As a resident, one of the concerns is I am not included in the decisions that are being made. When you look at a lot of the things that get passed, you might see maybe 10 residents who send in feedback. I think there has to be a lot more intentionality behind how we're engaging the community. We can't have a community of almost 63,000 people but make a decision that is going to affect our community beyond our time on Council.

'It's important to hear from people [and] do a financial audit, because it's one thing to say we have to increase or we're not spending. Put a freeze on property tax increases until we understand where waste is happening. We might say, 'It's just \$10 more on your taxes,' but what does that mean to a family?'

Communication and levelling the playing field for all has been a key tenet of Durrant's campaign. She says she believes incumbents have an advantage because they have not stepped aside for the duration of the campaign. She also says she feels the colour of her skin has been another barrier in getting her message out.

'You have to navigate this to look and sound like everyone else and I don't want to do that,' she says.

Yet, her experiences have helped her engage in other ways. She's setting out, she says, to 'dismantle apathy' in the electoral process

and 'make people feel more purposeful.'

'It's a short time to engage your community,' she says, noting that in doing so one of her platform planks that is resonating with voters is 'the need to keep services that are there for when and where they need it, especially for youth.'

'Young people keep saying to me, 'Why should I vote? I just go elsewhere anyway,' and that breaks my heart,' she says. 'Having a 21-year-old son, and explaining the journey for him and his experiences here, I was able to help young people say, 'That makes sense. I can see why.'

A top service youth are especially looking for are more opportunities to play basketball on full courts, when there are more options in the community to play on half-courts.

'Young people are talking a lot about basketball, about having a proper skating and bike ramp ' we have one right now at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex, but it could change place and it could be more enticing to make people want to go there, spend their day there and interact,' she says.

Transportation options are another top concern for young people, she says, and beyond that demographic, small business supports and addressing the affordability crisis are top-of-mind.

There have been 'little supports' for small business in the community since the start of the global pandemic, and supporting businesses can be as simple as changing the way the Town participates in grand openings; it should be more than just a photo op and a ribbon cutting, she contends. Instead, it should be about driving people to the destination to drum up businesses.

'When you look at business, a lot of the focus is in the Yonge and Wellington area, but we have businesses all over Aurora,' she says.

On the affordability front, 'there are a lot of things to sort out,' but keeping in mind it's Council as a whole that makes decisions rather than just the single vote of the Mayor, sorting it out starts with conversations.

Relationships are 'everything' and 'builders are extremely valuable to our community' but it's about creating partnerships that bring value to the community.

'I feel if they (residents and developers/builders) are in one room where the community is getting a chance to ask questions and hear for themselves, and we are creating incentives for them because they are business people and want to make money ' and you should make money when you're in business ' incentives are a win-win for both the community and builders,' she says. 'We can see more affordable homes coming into place, we can see that we can partner with Habitat for Humanity, we can see that middle piece that is missing, and a lot of residents have reached out to me about stable neighbourhoods.'

'Are we putting [secondary suites] all in one corner? Do we really look at that and make sure it is blended across Aurora properly? Not everyone wants to live in a condo, and you don't have to live in there to have affordability. We don't want to have enmity between the builders because at the end of the day you can see what happens: they go to the tribunal, they get their way, and the community still doesn't gain. When you have those conversations, the builders can see what's in it for them, the community can hear what it is'and both have to happen. You just have to be responsible for it.'

At the end of the day, Durrant says it's about looking how 'we can restore hope in Aurorans,' something she says is 'just really dying out.' Making a difference starts with leadership and, if she is elected on October 24, she says she wants people to hold her accountable.

'It is about diverse voices and perspectives that are all part of the change because Aurora is evolving and growing,' she says. 'As President of the Aurora Black Community I saw the power of coming together, I saw my ability for consensus building, I saw the

beauty and the effectiveness in it. Everyone takes a piece of the responsibility and then you can own it and you take pride in it because you are a part of it. When you're part of that process, you're a part of maintaining it. To see a Town as small as it is be so divided in its operation, I don't see why and I don't think it is necessary.

?It is the only way that others won't feel excluded and left out and it has nothing to do with culture, background, it is just about bringing the voices to the table, hearing from the people we're working for.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter