

Aurora Votes 2022: Ward 5 candidate Mae Khamissa vows to be a leader who listens



In her role as a business owner, a community activist, and a member of the Town of Aurora's Economic Development Board and Anti-Racism and Anti-Black Racism Task Force, Mae Khamissa has had a front row seat to hear some of the most important issues facing our community.

Now, she wants to be a voice at Aurora's most important table.

Khamissa, who co-owns Omars Shoes with her husband Raz, is officially in the running to become a Councillor serving Aurora's Ward 5.

Originally hailing from South Africa, Khamissa says she has been involved in the community "from day one in some form" since she first moved to Aurora 36 years ago.

Her experiences on boards serving the community, she says, have been "a phenomenal eye-opener" on the community, as have been the community members with whom she serves.

"I'm ready for the next step," she says. "I'm ready to be part of seeing positive change, for wanting to move forward, for wanting this Town to go ahead. I am happy to see we are seeing changes. Even with COVID, with the Board, we have made some great promotional videos and things to promote this Town and I think we've got the right people at the Town."

"I have had the opportunity to work with people from Town and that is basically how I came up with this idea of wanting to take the next step and being a part of a campaign in the sense of moving forward and making positive changes. I think we need to do that."

Khamissa has lived in the Ward 5 area for 15 years and moved her business from Aurora's southwest to the Bayview corridor last year. This perspective from both "halves" of Aurora has given her a unique sense of what to advocate for as a Ward 5 representative as well as a Council member who will be voting on all municipal issues.

"I know more people on the west side of Town because I spent 23 years there," she explains. "At first, I wasn't quite sure about the Ward system, but I like it because I think it makes you responsible. You can't hide under a rug anymore. You're there for the people in your ward and you have to be responsible to them. That, to me, is important."

"One of my concerns is I look at Aurora split in two. We have basically the east side and the west side. We know quite clearly that

everybody who lives on the west side knows everything about what's happening on the east because you have to come here for your groceries [etc.], so I would like to sit down and look into revitalizing areas of the west side to see how is it that we can get people on the east side of Aurora to engage and go down to it," she adds of her municipal-wide goals if elected.

"Sure enough, we're going to have the Town Square coming up and that is going to be fairly exciting and I am sure that's going to take people down there but we also have to work on inviting better businesses to go into our Yonge Street corridor. Those are things that have always been on my mind, and I'm grateful to talk about them because I've lived on both sides and I get it."

Specifically for Ward 5, addressing traffic concerns is one of Khamissa's top priorities.

Above all, however, is wanting the opportunity to sit down with residents one on one to hear their concerns.

"We can look at it in two different ways. Traffic can be a negative thing to some, but it's actually a positive thing to business owners because, when you have traffic, you're bringing in more people and the economy does better in your area," she says. "Those kinds of things are important. We have great parks in this area as well, but I would like to see maybe us bringing in something unique and different. We have Town Park on the west side, but why not bring in something like that on the east side?"

"Honestly, there are not a whole lot of promises I am going to be making; I would like to work basically with what people have in mind and come up with great ideas. I think I have always been able to work in a group of people and listen and that is, I think, key: how can we make a difference and make things better? You may deal with people racing down roads and those kinds of things, but how else can we make things better? The neat part of the Ward system is to be able for [a resident] to say, "This is what I am thinking of" and sit down to investigate what they're looking for, if it is desirable, if it is possible "all without spending a lot of taxpayers' money."

As an immigrant from South Africa, Khamissa says giving back has always been a priority for her and the roots of that desire are in her story "from "coming from a non-democratic society to a democratic society.

"Having the choice to vote and the choice for freedom "that is basically my motivation."

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter