

Business supports in focus during Aurora Chamber election debate

Canadians are set to go to the polls this Monday, September 20.

It was a snap election call in the middle of a pandemic, a process which is estimated to cost more than \$660 million when the dust settles. As such, business owners have been left questioning both the cost and the timing of the election during these uncertain times as many struggle to stay afloat.

This was a question posed to Newmarket-Aurora and Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill candidates last Wednesday by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce: What do you believe to be the one key issue for business owners moving forward and looking for reassurance?

First to tackle that question was Newmarket-Aurora NDP candidate Yvonne Kelly who said businesses were 'concerned' and that nobody wanted an election during a pandemic.

'During COVID, the NDP had small businesses' backs, making sure we had a wage subsidy, emergency relief, capping merchant fees and really going to bat for small businesses, and I think that is what we said we would continue to do,' she said. 'We don't want to see wage and rent subsidies lifted until people are back on their feet. We want to provide EI and CCP contributions for small businesses, for their employers, to retrain and to bring those folks back.'

Getting businesses back on track is also a focus for Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill NDP Janice Hagan who says a lesson coming out of COVID is that a 'basic, livable income' is a must going forward.

'The money comes back through taxes, businesses and a moving economy, she said. 'When people can only afford food and rent, which is basically it in York Region right now, if you make under \$50,000 a year, you're not spending money in businesses, you're not shopping, you're not travelling or participating in cultural activities that keep the economy booming. It is keeping businesses moving, keeping money in people's hands and keeping that money moving in our society because that is what an economy needs to do: it needs to grow and it needs to move.'

COVID, said Newmarket-Aurora Green Party candidate Tim Flemming, has put this country in a 'unique situation' and there needs to be a 'cooperative alliance' between employers and employees.

'We need to find something that is just and appropriate for both sides and for employers and businesses, they need to be supported with the appropriate training incentives, hiring incentives, to allow them to certainly build their force back in a profitable manner. We have a lot of very strong intellectual property, so we too can actually be a part of the renewable economy and we can base ourselves through small business because that is the engine, that is where people work day in and day out.'

People's Party of Canada candidate Anthony Siskos (Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill), on the other hand, had a different view, stating he was frustrated as an entrepreneur to see 'endless dollars put to waste' under the Liberal government.

'We need less government oversight in any sort of involvement when it comes to taxation, when it comes to income tax,' he said. 'We need to focus on incentivizing businesses to stay in Canada and not leave for Florida, because that is what is happening right now. [They are fleeing these places] because of taxation and mandates.'

Independent Newmarket-Aurora candidate Dorian Baxter said lowering of taxes will make it 'viable' for businesses to move forward.

'We need a renewable economy,' he said. 'I will have a platform that focuses entirely on Newmarket-Aurora businesses and will be meeting with them on a regular basis to see how we can give them the strength and the forward thrust required' and for heaven's

sake, no more shutdowns.?

Similarly, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill Libertarian candidate Serge Korovitsyn, wanted less government involvement, stating that he is having a hard time finding new employees for his business.

?I have opened positions and nobody even applies,? he said. ?I can't afford to pay too much, but it is just not happening. All the government shutdowns and government welfare affected the small businesses. Some businesses will survive and some will fail. This is normal life the way it is supposed to be.?

Liberal candidates Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket-Aurora) and Leah Taylor Roy (Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill) defended government programs like the CERB, wage subsidies and other pandemic-related supports with Van Bynen stating he was ?appalled? that people would say it was throwing money away.

?We will be extending the recovery hiring program to next April so we can continue our promise to be here whenever businesses need us, for as long as they need us,? he said. ?Our intent is to make sure we get back to the pre-pandemic economy but also the foundation that they move forward into?the future and an economy that will support the environment and support science and research.?

Taylor Roy responded from the perspective of a business person and entrepreneur.

?I am not sure who you were talking to during the pandemic, but the small businesses I was talking to in our riding were in desperate need of help and many of them would have shuttered their doors without the assistance. However, I would say that now we are pivoting and one of the best ways to avoid future lockdowns in businesses is for everyone to get vaccinated. We all know that vaccines are the best way to end this pandemic right now and I think our Liberal government has been strong against opposition, against people throwing rocks at us, against name calling, to say this is the best way to move forward and our small businesses can't afford another shutdown.

?Our government has two new programs to help young people train to help businesses, both in the green certification and also in technology to further enhance online programs. This is the type of thing our government should be doing in these transitions. I am proud of our track record and as a business person I am proud of the work this Chamber has done for us.?

Conservative candidates declined the Chamber's invitation to participate in the debate.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter