

Candidates outline approaches for affordable housing at election meeting



Housing is set to be front-of-mind this week for the community as local lawmakers debate the merits of a transitional and emergency housing facility in south Aurora, but it was on the minds of potential Provincial lawmakers last week as the Aurora Public Library held an all-candidates meeting on February 19.

Held in the performance hall within Aurora Town Square, the 90-minute meeting saw the participation of Newmarket-Aurora candidates Denis Heng (NDP), Chris Ballard (Liberal), and Shirin Khasbakhi (New Blue). Participating Aurora-Oak Ridges-Candidates were Naila Saeed (NDP), Jason Cherniak (Liberal), and Rosaria Wiseman (New Blue).

Absent from the session were incumbent Progressive Conservative candidates Dawn Gallagher Murphy (Newmarket-Aurora) and Michael Parsa (Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill), Green Party candidates David Jakubiec (Newmarket-Aurora) and Ikram Kahn (Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill), and Yuri Dubois, Newmarket-Aurora's Ontario Moderate Party candidate.

Here, candidates were asked how their respective parties supported the needs of the unhoused community and their answers are included here, beginning with the Liberal candidates.

LIBERAL

Supporting the unhoused comes down to affordability, said Ballard, and a variety of measures are needed to tackle the issue including increasing the amount of affordable housing, but doing so with wrap-around supports including mental health care.

We have to get people off the street, we have to get them into a home, and we have to provide them with the support that they need so they can be successful and they don't slide back into homelessness. I think that is really key: we need to continue to fund York Region social housing and other social housing organizations across the Province so they can provide housing and supports for people who are facing homelessness. We have to make sure there is a whole economic part of this that we have to take care of?

There is no silver bullet for this issue, I wish there was, but it is a very complex issue. It starts by supporting people, it starts by improving our local economy so people can make enough money to afford a place to live.?

Reforms also need to take place at the Ontario Landlord-Tenant board to clear a backlog of cases, thus increasing rental opportunities, added Cherniak.

A lot of those people living on the street have mental health issues, addiction issues, and we need to provide proper supports for

them because no matter how affordable the housing is, if somebody isn't able to work and hold down a job, they're not going to be able to make money to afford an affordable house," he said. "One thing the Liberals are committed to do is to double the current stock of supportive housing units, not just affordable, but supportive housing units. There will be wraparound services to make renting more affordable. We are going to introduce fair, phased-in rent control in the buildings that don't have it already and we're going to be able to establish a Rental Housing Support for Tenants fund to help vulnerable renters avoid eviction in times of financial emergencies."

NEW BLUE

Reforming the Landlord-Tenant Board to address rental supply was a view shared by candidates for the New Blue Party.

"We will reduce excessive taxation and government spending, which can help alleviate homelessness by making housing and the cost of living more affordable," said Wiseman, adding they would advocate for more Provincial autonomy on immigration. "Reducing the amount of immigration would help us with this. How can we allow so many people in if we can't even house the people that are already here? It doesn't work. We want to reduce housing demand by controlling immigration and we want to fix residential tenancy so we can bring landlords back to Ontario. We have lost hundreds if not thousands of small landlords who have left Ontario. They refuse to rent here because everything is so lopsided. We are being inundated with people who are taking advantage of landlords and bankrupting them."

Khasbakhi added: "The Blue will deregulate the housing market to boost supply and incentivize private sector affordable housing and reject government first approaches that inflate costs off prosperity, and not handouts and lead people out of poverty. We would cut the HST and development fees. We would make housing construction affordable."

NDP

Homelessness is a "growing crisis," said Saeed, that is "driven by a lack of affordable housing, underfunded support services, and the rising cost of living."

"We will immediately invest in building more supportive housing with wraparound services like mental health care, addiction treatment and programs to help people get out of homelessness," she said. "People experiencing homelessness deserve dignity and real solutions, not criminalization. We will ensure no one is forcibly removed from encampments without safe permanent housing alternatives. We will work with municipalities to increase funding for emergency shelters and ensure shelters are adequately staffed, safe, and accessible for those who need them."

Heng said central in their policy is building affordable housing "in the right places" with a diverse housing stock.

"We're going to create 60,000 new supportive housing units as part of our [plan] that would see an Ontario NDP government double the supply of affordable housing. We'll upload the shelter funding to the Province and have that responsibility to step up to the plate and actually deal with this crisis that is something we see across all municipalities in Ontario. Looking at some of the benefits, it is not just those who are currently unhoused, we're looking at prevention and the ability to provide more housing benefits that help people move out of shelters and into homes, and it will also stop people from losing their homes by bringing real rent protections in and doubling social insurance rates to ensure that people have a roof over their heads and are able to connect to the supports that they need to help our community."

By Brock Weir