

(VIDEO) Candidates tackle local issues in final provincial debate

By Brock Weir

As Provincial candidates gathered at Aurora Town Hall on Saturday afternoon for the last all-candidates' meeting before this Thursday's election, local issues came firmly into focus.

Attended by Liberal candidate Chris Ballard, Canadians' Choice candidate Dorian Baxter, Green Party candidate Andrew Roblin, and Progressive Conservative candidate Jane Twinney, candidates tackled issues ranging from fostering local business to transit issues well beyond the oft-discussed push for improved and all-day GO service around the Greater Toronto Area.

For many, it was the final chance to get to know their candidates and ask them the burning questions they had in mind prior to the June 12 vote and residents wanted to know how a vote for each of them would directly impact not only their bottom line, but also their quality of life.

(Text continues below)

The Auroran -- All Candidates' Meeting (Pt. 1 of 2)

The Auroran -- All Candidates' Meeting (Pt. 2 of 2)

Although companies like Hallmark Cards have recently left Aurora, and local stalwart Magna International has spoken against further expansion in Ontario, questions were raised at the local level recently about the imminent arrival of Bulk Barn's headquarters to Aurora and whether this new arrival brought "high quality, well-paying jobs" in Aurora.

On Saturday, it was the candidates' turn to define what that term meant to them and what they would do to foster their definition of "high quality, well-paying" opportunities in both Aurora and Newmarket.

For Twinney, good, well-paying jobs were essential for the riding, and needed.

"One of the things I am hearing all the time is we don't have that and it is not accessible," she said, noting the need to cut corporate taxes by 30 per cent. "Large corporations that have well-paying jobs will be coming to Newmarket, Aurora, and Ontario, and won't be leaving."

Another essential ingredient in coming up with a solution was the reduction of hydro rates and taxes on small business.

Lowering payroll taxes, on the other hand, was key for Roblin. A significant slash in payroll taxes would serve as an incentive for local companies to hire locally and keep money local. He also suggested "ending the monopoly" of the Beer Store in Ontario by allowing local craft brewers to sell their product, and encouraging the province of Ontario to purchase their electricity at a lower price from Quebec to keep local hydro rates low.

A good paying job for Baxter was one which provided not only job security, but also benefits. Aurora needs "four or five more Magnas", he said, and that would be fostered by focusing on Canada's existing relationships with nations within the Commonwealth and Francophonie.

95,000 "good paying jobs" were created in Ontario last year, argued Ballard, stating this would continue on an upward trajectory

through Ontario's Jobs and Prosperity Fund, as well as a 10-year investment in infrastructure and higher education.

All candidates agreed, however, that there are challenges that need to be addressed to pave the way for local business growth.

For Roblin, it was a matter of competing with larger, foreign-owned companies to maintain a worthwhile foothold. The Green Party's payroll tax deduction would go a long way to increase competition, he added.

'We have to make sure we keep our municipal taxes under control,' argued Ballard. 'Our local businesses pay an inordinate percentage of tax and if Mr. Hudak is allowed to download services onto municipalities I fear municipalities will be cutting services and having to raise municipal tax, which will have a negative impact, a serious impact on local business. We would continue to work closely with the Region to help people who want to be entrepreneurs, who want to start businesses in Newmarket-Aurora.'

Twinney, on the other hand, said she is hearing from local business owners that wading through red tape is currently one of their biggest challenges. Phasing it out by a third over three years, she said, would get businesses back on track.

'30 per cent corporate tax reduction for all businesses' is the important part,' she said. 'I don't believe certain companies should get grant money, and handouts. Entrepreneurs should spend time doing business and not worrying about red tape and getting caught up in all that paperwork that they have to do to try and create jobs. That doesn't create jobs.'

But, without a well-educated pool of potential job seekers, the benefits of any of these programs would likely come to naught.

EDUCATION

When asked what they would say are the biggest challenges facing the local education systems, each candidate said there is room for improvement.

For Twinney, the current education system is falling short and a beneficial change would be 'getting rid of some of the bureaucrats' in the education system 'telling teachers how to teach.' Principals and teachers should be given more authority in how they teach their students.

As a former educator, Baxter said he was concerned a Hudak government will bring larger class sizes through cuts, but those cuts would be unnecessary if the Feds' feet were held to the fire on equalization payments.

Quality education begins at kindergarten, for Ballard, and all-day kindergarten provides a good foundation, he said. Access to post-secondary too was 'critical' and he said he was 'delighted' with the Liberal plan to make post-secondary 'more affordable to middle class families.' He too said PC cuts would lead to losing teachers' aides, teaching assistants, and others that would result in a hit to the system.

Affordable education in the short term and long term is vital to quality of education, said Roblin. Merging the public and Catholic school boards could result in more money being directed to the classrooms. Other important components of a well-run education system included bringing a post-secondary institution to the riding, as well as improving access to transit.

TRANSIT

Transit issues, however, are more complex in York Region than just the GO System and Metrolinx. These issues include accessibility issues ranging from limited bus routes and service areas, and lack of options for those who are physically challenged. For others, a standard fare of \$4 for the YRT might be beyond their means.

Addressing broader transit challenges, Ballard said one needed to take a 'step back' and look at a 'final mile solution' to your commute. From his perspective, working with the municipalities on mobility transit is important as they are the ultimate authority in licensing taxis and working with people faced with mobility challenges.

“It all starts in my mind with the east-west, north-south routes the government has funded and will continue to fund,” he said.

Transit would also be a top priority for the PCs, said Ms. Twinney, and additional capital dollars towards it would come from surpluses coming from our aggressive plan to balance the budget.”

“We need to demand better service and value from our current operators and we also need to make sure that all-day, two-way GO Train service does happen now. We have been waiting 10 years.”

Additional priorities of a PC government would include expanding highways to fix bottlenecks and rush hour issues.

Bottlenecks, for Mr. Roblin, could be a solution to itself suggesting congestion charges, gas taxes and parking fees as “one of the ways we can raise \$3 billion a year to dedicate towards a transit fund.” The parties say they are going to tackle transit, but they aren’t willing to say how they were going to do it,” he added.”

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

At the end of a long commute, however, what exactly are you going to be coming home to? Many see affordable housing as a key component to the continued vitality of a community but this is often something in short supply. When asked what each would do to increase the availability of affordable housing in the riding, Mr. Roblin said it was about working with developers to ensure affordable housing.

Mr. Baxter said redistribution of gas tax and equalization payments would provide the means to incentivise the affordable housing market, while Ballard stressed the importance of working with other levels of government to make it a reality.

“It is important that as development moves ahead in both our communities that [we work with the Region and Developers] to set aside a certain number of units to seniors and young families, so they can have a place to live in a facility that is geared to their income,” he said, noting he would like to see a revival of the co-op housing movement.

Ms. Twinney, on the other hand, said York Region currently has the lowest number of apartment and rental units per capita, and she would work with developers to ensure “purpose built apartments are affordable, homes are available for young people who are moving in and can’t afford homes to purchase, as well as for seniors who are downsizing.”