

Community safety, housing raised at all-candidates' meeting

Community safety was a hot-button issues raised at an all-candidates meeting held February 19.

Hosted by the Aurora Public Library at 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-Richmond Hill 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 Duboiskey, Newmarket-Aurora's Ontario Moderate Party candidate.

As the evening turned to community safety, moderator Grace Armstrong asked the assembled company how their respective parties would respond to such concerns, particularly residential break-ins and car thefts.

Their responses are arranged below by party, starting with the Ontario New Democrats.

NDP

Heng described a safe community as one where everyone is 'able to thrive,' including 'better education opportunities, better job opportunities, and making life more affordable, fair and accessible.' What's needed, he said, was a 'proactive' rather than 'reactive' government, which will improve the approach to community safety.

The incumbent Progressive Conservative government, he said, has 'shied away' from tackling the real issues in favour of casting blame on the Federal government.

'An Ontario NDP government would work with the Federal Government and a coordinated support of federal jurisdiction activities aimed at decreasing the number of car thefts, but we would also look at what's within our control,' he said. 'The idea of catch and release I think, is a misnomer because it is fuelled by the idea of our court system and how under-funded and under-staffed it is. That is something with a provincial jurisdiction that could be addressed today with regards to adequately funding and taking responsibility for the court systems to make sure that when individuals they are able to seek justice and have their day in court in a timely manner and individuals are not released due to administrative gaps and timelines.'

Saeed noted the NDP will take a 'comprehensive approach' to addressing the root causes of crime. She also said an NDP government would tackle auto theft through enhanced VIN number tracking.

'We will support well-trained community-focused policing that builds relationships with residents, prioritizes crime prevention and ensures strict responses to vehicle theft and break-ins,' she said. 'We will push for faster insurance claim processes and greater support for victims of crime, theft and break-ins, ensuring that they are not left struggling due to administrative delays. The Ontario NDP believes that safe communities require both smart enforcement and strong social supports to prevent crime before it happens by holding offenders accountable.'

LIBERAL

Increased funding was needed to help combat both auto-theft and break-ins, said Ballard, who emphasized this needs to work in conjunction with cross-jurisdictional policing.

'So many of the breakthroughs that has come about with auto-thefts were because Peel, York, Durham and Toronto were able to

work together," he said. "We need to fund that type of activity and make sure it is well-funded. Bonnie Crombie sat on Peel Police Services Board for many years. She knows the flaws of the system and she was here in Town a couple of weeks ago talking to seniors about the need to fix the bail system. It is not that we need new laws and new regulations, we need to fund the system so dangerous criminals aren't released back on the street when they should be held over."

Cherniak said, "what's happened throughout York Region on these fronts is unacceptable" and said the Province needs to do something "other than blame the Feds."

"You need more money in the system so that judges actually have the jail space to put somebody in instead of putting them out on bail. Another problem is trials aren't happening for two years, so if an accused person is guilty, they wouldn't have been out on bail if they had their trial three months after they were arrested". [The Province] can hire more judges, they can speed up those processes. I have also spoken to local police about this issue and what they say is the auto manufacturers have to make it harder to steal vehicles in the first place.

"When we got rid of keys in cars, did anyone think it meant your car could be stolen like that because someone walks by your front door? The Province has a role to play in that car manufacturing process and making sure the rules are harder for those cars to be stolen."

NEW BLUE

Wiseman said her party would "enforce the rule of law" and "enhance" law enforcement capabilities.

"We're going to reject catch and release bail policies. We're also going to give municipalities the ability to run workshops so they can help their community figure out what is the best way to secure properties and secure their vehicles. People don't know how break-ins are happening, they don't know how to protect themselves from it, they don't what safeguards are put in place, they don't know what safeguards they need for their vehicles. Public awareness is one thing we're going to promote to the municipalities."

Added Khasbakhi: "The New Blue Party backs law enforcement with tools to combat crime, such as stricter penalties for repeat offenders and dismantling gangs profiting from stolen vehicles."

By Brock Weir