

Conservative candidates decline Vote Smart debate



(From Left) Brenda Power (NDP candidate, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill), Yvonne Kelly (NDP, Newmarket-Aurora), Leona Alleslev (Liberal, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill), Kyle Peterson (Liberal, Newmarket-Aurora), and Vanessa Long (Green, Newmarket-Aurora) attend a launch event for Vote Smart at the Aurora Cultural Centre on Friday morning. Auroran photo by Brock Weir

By Brock Weir

Local Conservative candidates have declined to participate in a series of all-candidates meetings set for Aurora on September 16 and 17.

The debates in question are part of the Vote Smart campaign initiated by Aurora university student Kelsea Walsh.

In the planning stages since early May, Vote Smart is intended to be a new twist on giving local candidates a platform to explain why they are running in this Federal election, speak about the issues that matter to them, and engage with potential constituents ? particularly younger and undecided voters.

Newmarket-Aurora candidates Yvonne Kelly (NDP), Vanessa Long (Green), and Kyle Peterson (Liberal), along with Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill candidates Leona Alleslev (Liberal) and Brenda Power (NDP) joined Ms. Walsh at Vote Smart's ?final push? launch at the Aurora Cultural Centre on Friday morning, but Newmarket-Aurora Conservative candidate Lois Brown and Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill Conservative candidate Costas Menegakis were conspicuous by their absence.

?We have everything planned now and all the candidates have said they are going to come, but I am still waiting for Lois Brown and Costas Menegakis,? said Ms. Walsh following the event. ?I am still hoping they will be able to make it out. Everyone has a very busy schedule, so it is a matter of getting a response and with some of the people I have been working with. It is quite difficult to get a response or find the time in their schedules to come to Vote Smart-related events.

?I think it would be a real shame if one of the parties were absent. I created Vote Smart not because I have any political agenda. I don't care what the turnout of the night is or what the outcome is for the night. I really just want people to come and be informed, vote and feel they got something useful out of Vote Smart. [This event] can only be as useful as it could be if all the parties are present. It can only do its full job if all the parties are present.?

By Friday afternoon, however, it was clear Vote Smart would not be firing on all cylinders by the time the Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill candidate take the stage at the Cultural Centre on September 16, followed the next evening by

Newmarket-Aurora candidates, with Mr. Menegakis saying he and Ms. Brown would not be taking part.

?The two debates I am doing are the [Richmond Hill and Aurora] Chamber of Commerce debate they are doing jointly, and the Rogers debate,? he said. ?I will not be participating in the Vote Smart campaign and my understanding is neither will Lois. It is a campaign decision we took early on when Vote Smart came up. It is two debates we did in the last election, as well, that have a wider audience -- and the Rogers Debates. Any local debates, small things here and there, just doesn't fit into our campaign plan.

?We're scheduled every single day back to October 19 and we made sure we made room for the two big debates so we have an opportunity to answer questions and do all that wonderful stuff we're supposed to do to get our message out and converse with constituents through the Chambers, Rogers and the media that will be there as well.?

Both Vote Smart events run 6.30 ? 9 p.m.

Newmarket-Aurora politicians have been invited to participate in their first all-candidates meeting ? this one a forum focusing on social issues ? this Thursday, September 10, from 7.30 ? 9.30 p.m. at Newmarket's Trinity United Church. All are welcome to attend.