

Environmentalism has vision for 'connected' community



By Brock Weir

Aurora's Svetla Topouzova had the papers with her for a long time and she spent her Christmas holidays making sure they were just right and then, come January 2, she was ready to go.

When Town Hall re-opened for 2014 on January 2, Ms. Topouzova was first out of the gate to file papers as a Council candidate in this year's municipal election.

For Ms. Topouzova, a member of Aurora's Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC), this is the next natural step in her civic engagement.

"I do believe I am at a stage in life where I can give back to the community and contribute to the public domain based on my practical experience and strategic vision," she says. "I certainly believe I can contribute to the Town of Aurora as a Councillor."

Ms. Topouzova says she was very "eager" to proceed with her candidacy and over the past few years she has been actively involved in EAC, a regular attendee of Council meetings, and even stood as a candidate to replace Gord Kerr, who resigned as Aurora and King's public school trustee midway through the 2010-2014 term.

In the meantime, she has also spearheaded efforts to protect trees throughout Aurora, particularly east of Bayview Avenue, and has been an increasingly vocal advocate for many environmental and green projects related to the Town's remaining open spaces.

"Being European, it is almost our second nature to be involved with what is going on around us in the very close community where we live, and also the general country where we live," says Ms. Topouzova, a native of Bulgaria, who came to Canada with her husband and two children in 1998.

"I am very glad I do have this opportunity to get involved directly with the community where we live and come to know the people, get to know the services provided, because that is what really matters. At the end of the day, this is what fulfils your life and that is the foundation of my motivation to move forward in this direction."

Part of what attracted her and her family to Canada was the country's social system, including government supported health care, public education, and the interconnectivity of local communities. They first planted their Canadian roots in the Greek areas of the Danforth. From there, they were attracted to Aurora based not only on the new development but also how "green" the Town was. Here, they have become involved with their community, but also kept a strong attachment to their heritage forming a Bulgarian

Bible Study Group, as well as a new, fledgling social group for Europeans in the Aurora area.

"When we first came here, we had the feeling we were breathing fresh air compared to Toronto," she says. "This is a strong motivation for me to keep working on green initiatives and I will make my best efforts to work towards that."

This experience is not the only motivation she has. Formerly involved in international banking at ScotiaBank in Toronto, her job history, she says, puts her in good stead for budget talks, as well as an eye for making sure projects come in on time and within budget. It is a philosophy she currently puts in practice as the financial agent of the Newmarket-Aurora Federal Liberal Association.

"Aurora should be a safe, clean and green community and I believe I have a strategic vision and operational capacity to support a statement like that," she says. "I am following closely the Town's Strategic Plan and I am a big supporter of the revitalization of the Downtown area. I think it is a great step to make. I also believe that every opportunity made to expand on the environmental bylaws in the community [should be followed through]."

As such, she has been pushing at the EAC level for a Citizen's Environmental Plan to provide resources and the blueprints for residents at large to augment environmental initiatives already underway at the municipal level. That, she says, would be an important part of engaging citizens in the community.

Engagement, she says, is also important for Aurora east of Bayview Avenue, an area in which she lives.

"I personally believe it is beneficial for this east part of Aurora to have a strong Councillor representation," she says, noting it is going to be a very important area in Town over the 2014-2018 term of Council when construction begins in earnest in the 2C Development between Bayview and Leslie north of Wellington Street, bringing with it increased traffic, and other challenges.

"You need to create opportunities so people can go out there and speak out on their opinions and also connect," she says. "I would like to see a connected town and a connected community, even though it is a very diverse community today."