

Infrastructure contributions aren't enough, say NDP, Liberal

By Brock Weir

The Federal Government has contributed funds to several infrastructure projects in Aurora over recent years, including the replacement of the GO Transit bridge at the south end of town. But, for candidates challenging Conservative Lois Brown for the riding of Newmarket-Aurora, the Feds simply have not done enough.

Infrastructure investment was the dominant topic when Ms. Brown, NDP candidate Yvonne Kelly, Green Party candidate Vanessa Long and Liberal Kyle Peterson came together at Newmarket Theatre last week for a debate on issues hosted by the Newmarket Chamber of Commerce.

Moderated by Bill Hogg, the all-candidates session pressed for specifics on how each candidate would address a perceived infrastructure deficit in communities like Aurora and Newmarket, particular the 'unsexy' details like infrastructure.

An important issue to consider is the Federal government owns only 20 per cent of infrastructure across the country, with the balance in the hands of the provinces and municipalities, said Ms. Brown. Significant investments were already made by the Conservative government including a \$2 billion annual fund for infrastructure.

'We paid for the extension of the 404 north and the 407 east and the gas fund refund that comes back to municipalities was doubled and is permanent, it is indexed, and that is money the municipalities can count on year after year to do the kinds of infrastructure investments they need to do,' said Ms. Brown, who responded to Ms. Kelly's question on why infrastructure was 'crumbling' by saying municipalities and provinces have not continued to invest in it.

'In the time I have been a Member of Parliament, \$13 million has come to the Town of Newmarket and almost \$8 million has come to the Town of Aurora.'

Infrastructure funding is 'all well and good' but the real issue is stable funding, contended Ms. Kelly. While municipalities own the lion's share of infrastructure they receive, on the other hand, just eight cents on the tax dollar to maintain it.

'The NDP are willing to make a \$1.3 billion annually for the next 20 years, which does differ from the Liberal plan which is looking at a much more short term output for moneys to municipalities,' said Ms. Kelly. 'We agree it will create many jobs, but we see this as a long term plan over 20 years because that is what it is going to take to invest in municipalities. We also believe you need to be at the table. Municipalities have struggled under this government to have no Prime Minister to talk to for the last 10 years. They are fed up.'

From Ms. Brown's perspective, the gas tax refunds was that stable source of funding municipalities were looking for and can count on. They don't need to go through the Provinces to receive this funding, enabling them to focus on their capital cost investments.

'[The Association of Municipalities of Ontario] is saying there is a huge deficit in infrastructure funding, so whatever you're spending isn't enough,' countered Mr. Peterson. 'You can't say it is the job of the provinces or municipalities and we don't need to invest in that.'

Every day, Aurorans commuting to work in Toronto face a bottleneck where the 404 and Don Valley Parkway meet the 401. Candidates were quizzed on whether their respective parties had any plans to deal with that issue. For Ms. Brown, that was a provincial decision, but again cited the Federal contributions to the highway extensions. Provinces like Ontario need to set their priority projects for the Federal government to come to the table with money.

Creating 'alternatives' is the NDP's plan to address that issue, said Ms. Kelly. For her, the real question was how to address the issue in the long term, and that is with a better transit plan and working with municipalities to identify transit issues and making it accessible and attractive for everyone to take it.

A similar view was offered by Mr. Peterson who added there needs to be more dialogue between the Provinces and Feds to identify what needs to be done to benefit the local communities most.