

Mayoral candidates focus on local business at election meeting

Aurora's mayoral candidates continue to share the visions they have for the community ahead of the October 24 municipal election.

Last week offered Phiona Durrant, Anna Lozyk Romeo, and incumbent Tom Mrakas two opportunities to share their views with potential voters; first at an all-candidates meeting hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce on October 4, and again the following evening at a meeting for Ward 1 candidates hosted by the Town Park Area Ratepayers Association.

At the Chamber meeting, which was held virtually over Zoom at 8.30 a.m., the three mayoral candidates shared their business credentials with the business community and fielded questions from Chamber president Sandra Ferri.

One of the areas of focus was how Aurora businesses fared during the first two years of the global pandemic and what further supports are needed to ensure they thrive into the future.

‘We’ve heard that although businesses survived the pandemic through three very difficult years, the more difficult role will be in the next few years through the recovery period,’ said Ms. Ferri. ‘What do you think are the greatest barriers for local businesses and what will you do to provide support to businesses through your term of office?’

First to answer their question was Durrant, a small-business owner herself.

‘[When I drove] around Town during COVID, I felt the brutality of the lack of support,’ she said. ‘Business owners are facing depression, mental health issues, bankruptcy. It’s not as fancy as asking what we’re going to do; we have to be intentional to serve.’

‘I think Aurora is 64 per cent small businesses [‘but?’] we can see businesses that are going out, places that bring community together have been closed, and big box stores are building out. We have to be intentional in taking care of those who are here because the common denominator of progress is our people and we need to pay attention to them.’

Lozyk Romeo was next, stating business owners are primarily focused on ways to recover ‘but not all recoveries have been equal, she contended.

‘Unfortunately, some areas did lose business and we still have closed buildings and vacant properties. I like to talk to small business and sometimes with the Town programs, we’re imposing more financial pressure on business and perhaps with the permits and programs we can do economic impact studies and hopefully maybe provide some relief to businesses that will need to recover.

‘One of the things we have learned also is businesses being on Town properties during the pandemic, the ones that operate on Town property were closed down and we had to subsidize them in the end. Maybe that’s something we, as a community, and as a business community [should] think about for the future and when making these decisions and creating partnerships.’

Mrakas underscored how ‘tough’ the last two-and-a-half years had been for local businesses and said ‘we’re still working through things and seeing how we can elevate our businesses.’

‘It’s not just about attracting new businesses; it’s about ensuring the supports are there for existing businesses and making sure they thrive as we continue to move out of this pandemic. I have been nothing but a fierce advocate for our local businesses. We created a Business Continuity Task Force [and] we did some tremendous work.

‘We had the Explore Aurora website where we were encouraging people to shop local. We looked at it as an opportunity to utilize that extra space, so that has been working very well and we’re looking at continuing that even beyond the pandemic? Through our Small Urban Mayors GHTA meetings, we sat down with the Premier and discussed how we can all work together collaboratively so that they can provide the financial support to our local businesses.’

Affordability, a hot button issue throughout the campaign, was also linked to business with Ms. Ferri stating that "affordable and available housing" continues to be a concern for many, including business owners looking out for their employees.

Citing a recent column in the Toronto Star, Ms. Ferri said that developers are "frustrated" with lengthy approval processes to get their projects off the ground on both the residential and commercial sides, questioning the candidates on what each of them would do to "fast track" the approval process.

"Ultimately, while we want to have an efficient approval process, we also need to ensure we continue through the Public Planning process," replied Mrakas. "We want to make sure the residents are engaged. While we want to streamline it, cut some red tape, we always want to make sure the public is engaged and the public is part of the process."

"A lot" of the delays, he said, can be attributed to "third party agencies" like the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority, which has a separate process to look at and evaluate the applications.

"We're trying to work with the province to speed up that process as well," he continued. "Ultimately, affordable housing, attainable housing, it is about putting in the proper policies within the Official Plan (OP) and areas that can get developed and built, with that attainable housing, your duplexes, triplexes, mid-rise" we have done that and working towards that through our OP update. Unfortunately, that is not what gets built. That is not what is profitable. We need to work with the Province and make sure they put the proper policies in place to incentivize and make sure the development community is building what is required in each of our individual communities. Aurora in the last five years, zero duplexes, zero triplexes. It is not because they can't be built, it's they're not being built and they need to be built."

From the perspective of Durrant, there needs to be more "equity" in the process.

"We're taking years to issue permits," she said. "I think in affordable housing, until we can address how long it is taking to get permits, making it easier, making it equitable for everyone and really seek partnership with a builder," she said. "We can't pass up that responsibility. We have to take accountability forward" it is on us and we have to do what we can to adhere and we have to make sure the concerns of the neighbours who want to build things are heard, but we have to address that permits issue. We have to address the partnership issue, and we need to collaborate and when that is not in place, nothing will be able to be affordable."

Rounding out this topic was Lozyk Romeo who said affordability is indeed an issue and that over the last four years she was unsure anything had been done to improve the situation.

"Maybe we should review our planning process," she said. "Another thing we can do is maybe we can come up with strong partnership relationships with the municipality, developer, and upper-tier government, and each will have a part to play in the municipality" to provide maybe a land developer" with the construction of affordable housing and funding it from the upper-tier government.

"I think affordable rental units are really good transition from traditional housing to move up to own a house. Since this is [hosted] by the Chamber of Commerce, I think also having good local jobs and good public transportation and active transportation" will help with maintaining affordable housing."

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