

Mayoral candidates share environmental concerns at APL meeting

The 2022 municipal race has afforded voters different visions for Aurora during the 2022-2026 term of Council and beyond ? but one area in which the three people vying to be Mayor can agree on is the environment is well worth further protections.

Candidates Phiona Durrant, Tom Mrakas and Anna Lozyk Romeo expressed their views last month at an all-candidates meeting hosted by the Aurora Public Library.

Featuring input from just about every person vying for a seat at the Council table on October 24, moderator Reccia Mandelcorn, Manager of Community Collaboration at the Library, posed several questions to the mayoral candidates that had been submitted by members of the public.

These concerns ranged from the affordability crisis to environmental protections.

?Do you think Aurora's Official Plan goes far enough to protect the natural environment?? Ms. Mandelcorn asked of the upcoming Plan, which will serve as a blueprint for Aurora's growth and development through 2051. ?What changes to environmental policies have you seen, or would you like to see in the new draft Official Plan??

Responding first was Durrant, who referenced the Climate Emergency declared by the outgoing Council as well as work that has been carried out at Town Hall through the Community Energy Plan.

?Things are already in place and we now just have to look at them and see if they're working, reassess them if they need to be done, and bring action forward that's going to be helping because I have seen, according to studies from the University of Toronto, that climate change is affecting our seniors and I see [a report from the CBC] that almost 100 [seniors] homes?don't have air conditioning in their room,? said Durrant. ?It's a big issue to address [and] I would look at what's there, work with elected Council, and make the change that is needed.?

Next to address the issue was Lozyk Romeo who underscored the urgency for doing more.

?No matter what our Official Plan is right now?our greenspaces are shrinking,? she said. ?That's the thing ? greenspaces are not enough; I think we need to preserve the natural environment and we need to protect, we need to strengthen the parameters. I believe that we need to protect our habitats of species at risk. One last thing, maybe outside the Official Plan, but I think decision-makers should follow through [on] those plans and the decision-makers come together.?

Last to tackle this question was incumbent Mrakas who said Council has done ?many things? to strengthen environmental protection, including the development of green development standards across Aurora.

?We're one of the few municipalities that have that green standard within any development and any application that comes forward,? he said. ?We want to make sure that any development that comes forward makes sure that it follows our protections from a green standard perspective and it continues to protect our environment. Beyond that, our Official Plan talks about tree canopies and when you do look at our tree canopy, not only is it one of the best in York Region, we continue to improve and grow our tree canopy. We're at 34 per cent [and] the recommended range for tree canopy from York Region is 29 per cent to 35 per cent. We're at 34 per cent already and we're continually growing that.

?Our green spaces are continuously growing?we have one of the best trail systems in all of York Region if not the GTHA and we continue to make them even better. From a green perspective, we're going to continue to work hard to make sure our environment is protected, our Oak Ridges Moraine is protected, and we continue to protect the greenbelt. I voted against any of those changes at the Regional level at Council, in their Official Plan, and I will continue to fight to ensure we protect our environment not only [within] our borders but across York Region.?

The next question on the environment looped back to development, with Ms. Mandelcorn asking the candidates to ?address concerns on the influence of developers with respect to the removal of trees and the impact on existing ecosystems.?

Tackling the question first was Mrakas who said it was ?not a great question.?

?Personally, I don't think there's any influence from developers,? he said. ?They can come forward and request whatever they like through any application process, but ultimately my decision process lies with what's best for our community, for the residents of our community, and?I respect and hope that every member at the Council table respects that and does the exact same thing.?

Durrant tackled the question next and said developers do influence the process but ?that decision can be positive or negative based on who is in leadership.?

?What I'm looking forward to do, when elected, is to bring all developers into one room and have that conversation where communities can meet and talk with them,? she said. ?I also want to include incentives to promote green buildings when they're building, that they will feel rewarded because developers are those owners and they're looking for benefits like any other business. When we create incentives, rebates and negotiate so they don't have to go off to the tribunal and do things we are no longer in control with, they are influential. [I] want to make sure that whatever I am agreeing with? is in the best interest of our communities, not for my pocket, not for my comfort, but community voices are brought to the table.

?We have seen that inflexible strategy from leaders that make a knowledge[able] voice feel like they are the problem but we want the community to come in, speak to the builders, and get to know them, because I know builders can make a difference and we know that they are the solution when we work together as a team, and that's what I'm looking forward to doing.?

Rounding out the discussion was Lozyk Romeo who said, ?Developers are doing what they're supposed to do.?

?They're going to come in and they're going to want to develop,? she said. ?If they want to remove the trees, they will remove the trees, but it is up to us and our policies to uphold them and make sure we don't remove the mature trees. I am not a tree-hugger, but mature trees are better for the environment, but we also have to make sure that?.is not enough. We can't give in to them what they want.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter