

Mayoral candidates tackle taxes, inflation at all-candidates meeting

Candidates vying to be elected Aurora's mayor for 2022-2026 in this Monday's municipal election had the chance to sound off on taxes and inflation at a recent all-candidates meeting hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

Speaking before a virtual audience of local business leaders, candidates Phiona Durrant, Anna Lozyk Romeo and Tom Mrakas were asked whether, in light of inflation, they would commit to an increased tax threshold.

First to answer the question was Lozyk Romeo who said a commitment couldn't be made without looking at the 2023 Budget.

"I think the responsible answer will be that when I see the Budget and we see [what's on it] we will make the decision then," she said. "We have to be fiscally responsible. We have Aurora Town Square that will be going live with an operating budget, so we will have tax pressures. I can't promise anything, but I will make sure it is low, make sure that we're fiscally responsible, make sure we're also fiscally transparent and we'll see that at Budget 2023."

In answering the question, incumbent Mrakas said he was going to "stay the course" and highlighted the tax record of the outgoing 2018-2022 Council.

"We have the lowest four-year tax rate in over 20 years," he said. "We're going to continue to stay that course. We have [had] strong financial management of your tax dollars [and] we have done that through the Finance Advisory Committee and we're going to continue that work."

"We're going to continue to look for efficiencies all the time and that is what our job is. I have always said, and I maintain, that our job is to ensure that we provide the services that our residents and our businesses need at the lowest price possible and that's what we're going to continue to do. We have done a tremendous job to date and we're going to continue to do that job. Aurora is the eighth-lowest taxes in the entire GTHA and so we're going to continue on that path and look at continuing to lower that so we can be in the Top 5."

Responding next was Durrant who said community is "not something that is built every four years" but every day based on "basic shared values."

"When elected, you're really looking to [have] a financial audit in our system and looking to our budget," she said. "COVID has taught us that for us to be economically strong we have to have a chance where everyone is succeeding. The commitment is I am for the people. If we're doing things that do not benefit the people then it shouldn't be done. When elected, I am looking to consult with the community, consult with the staff, consult with elected Council and look at what the Budget is and where we need to make adjustments that are serving our community so they can eat healthy meals. That is lacking in our community to not be able to afford food based on the cost of living in Aurora. That is my commitment to make sure that nothing is missed."

Building on the previous question, the next one posed by Aurora Chamber of Commerce President & CEO Sandra Ferri said, "further to the need to possibly raise taxes, what additional revenue streams would you be prepared to introduce and/or support?"

One area of common ground shared by Mrakas and Lozyk Romeo was the possibility of additional revenues that would be raised by a Regional tax on vacant homes.

"[That] will also help with making sure our properties don't remain vacant," said Mrakas. "That is an additional revenue stream, as well as the AMPS program, a monetary penalty system. But the Province also needs to afford all municipalities the tools that they provided for Toronto [and] we're working with the Province to look at upping what is provided for us as other smaller communities, especially small urban GTHA municipalities."

?We have advocated at AMO (Association of Municipalities of Ontario) for a long time [for] municipalities to receive at least 1 per cent of sales tax or the GST from the Province and the Feds and that would solve a lot of issues from a revenue stream perspective and would allow us to keep our property taxes low and continue to bring in revenue. The only [way] municipalities have to bring revenue stream in is user fees or property taxes. We're going to advocate and work hard with the Province, with the Premier, with the Minister of Municipal Affairs to ensure that we can put proper funding in place and continue to grow our revenue streams.?

Lozyk Romeo agreed that the vacant homes tax was a good one and said that she's knocked on ?a lot? of doors to vacant homes during the campaign.

?I think there could be a benefit to the community and hopefully we can clean up those issues with a vacant homes [tax],? she said. ?Bringing up big business, that is another good revenue stream: I think we have a good example from what is happening [at] the Highway 404 corner that Smart Centres brought the dealership and a few retailers and storage? I believe there is \$2 million in extra revenue for the tax. It is not just about bringing additional revenue streams, it is also reducing spending and I think maybe that is the area we should be looking at also because that's something that maybe we look at in the next term.?

An additional focus, said Durrant, should be ?uplifting? the community.

?It is great to bring new revenue streams but how are we lifting up the businesses who are floored and on their faces right now?? she asked. ?How are we helping them getting revenue into their families? Small businesses are having to pay property taxes, leases, and their mortgages. How are we helping them? Have we looked into our own finances as a Town and see what we need to cut back and where we can make adjustments there?... The businesses that are not getting any support in Town and how can we uplift them? That's what my focus is.

?How can we uplift the mothers, fathers, and parents who are trying to add value to their community but there are no resources for them to help them maintain and keep their door open? How can we make sure that in a pandemic we're helping businesses who are new and open in getting tickets because of COVID regulations? There is so much we can do for business.?

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