

Newmarket-Aurora candidates tackle housing and food banks



By Brock Weir

In the second Vote Smart debate, hosted by Aurora university student Kelsea Walsh, three of Newmarket-Aurora's five candidates took to the stage for a wide-ranging discussion on issues facing Aurora's northern riding.

In a hypothetical situation posed to the candidates by Ms. Walsh, candidates Yvonne Kelly (NDP), Vanessa Long (Green) and Kyle Peterson (Liberal) were asked how they would address the issue of affordable housing and the cost of living nation-wide. (Conservative candidate Lois Brown declined the invitation to participate)

"The riding is growing day by day," said Ms. Walsh in her hypothetical. "There are more families moving into Aurora and more families in need of homes. Some of these families are Canadian, some are not. Whatever the case, these constituents find themselves doubling up in homes in order to afford the houses they are living in. However, these low-income families often frequent the community food bank.

"Currently, our community food bank regulates distribution per household and not per family. Only one of two families can receive food every week."

In addressing this issue, Ms. Long stressed the Green Party commitment to establish a "guaranteed livable income" that eliminates the danger of "precarious employment" and eliminating the need for overtaxing food banks.

"The situation isn't staying the same, it is getting worse," said Ms. Long. "We're proposing to really change it because if things haven't changed in 25 years, maybe it is time to do something really different. We're talking about making bold changes: a national housing plan, a national building code, and an army of contractors who are doing retrofits. We're talking about \$400 million a year to create 20,000 new units of new affordable housing per year."

For Ms. Kelly, Ms. Walsh's hypothetical situation had already proven itself to be a reality. Food banks across York Region are currently experiencing just such a challenge and they are being "forced to make rules they don't even want to make" because they only have so many resources and don't want to see anyone go without. 841,000 people across Canada use food banks every day, she offered, and 4 million people are actually "food insecure" and food banks were only designed to be short-term solutions to these problems.

"We need to reinvest for seniors, we need to look at what we're doing with our youth, and we need to raise our minimum wage because more and more people are living on the edge," said Ms. Kelly. "People you wouldn't expect are relying on our food banks. One thing we know that is leading to this substantially right here in York Region is the rise of low-paying, precarious work. We need strong, full-time, good-paying jobs to address this situation. You can't expect your food banks to do this, and to rely on charity to meet basic needs for people across Canada is an absolute atrocity."

For Mr. Peterson, this comes back to two fundamental issues: housing and food supply. All Canadians, he said, can agree everyone has the right to healthy and adequate food as well as affordable housing. Without these fundamentals, many things in life can't be achieved. To address this, Mr. Peterson pointed to the Liberal plan to create jobs through significant investments in infrastructure, as well as their affordable housing policy.

The best social program in this situation is a good, high paying job, he said. We need to make sure there is investment on infrastructure, an advancement in Canadians, and an investment in growth to make that happen. You don't get that way by cutting; you don't get that way by cutting the budget, you don't get that way by cutting programs. Without investment, there is not going to be job creation. That has to be step one.

Step two has got to be to make sure the housing program that is there addresses the needs. Lack of affordable housing is a real problem and it is a real problem in York Region and Newmarket-Aurora.