

VOTE 2014: A councillor's job is no longer a part-time position, says candidate Linda Stephens



By Brock Weir

Having grown up in a politically-minded household, running for office was never a matter of 'if' but 'when', for Linda Stephens.

The Aurora realtor is one of 28 candidates vying for a Council seat in this month's municipal election. In her view, significant growth and evolution in Aurora have greatly changed the face of what it means to be a Councillor, and that reality should be reflected around the Council table. While it might not be something that can be delivered across the board, Ms. Stephens says she is prepared to do her part.

'We have grown to a point where it is no longer a part-time venture, and it is no longer a part-time hobby,' she says. 'We have a lot of serious issues that are facing the Town in the coming years, and all of it is our taxpayer money. I believe Aurorans deserve to have somebody in the building, in the office, accessible to our residents and business owners during business hours, and I can certainly provide that full-time representation.'

Ms. Stephens was considering a Council run in 2010, but now that her kids are a little bit older, her family is secure, and she has assembled a 'team' to keep her real estate interests going, she now can fully focus on a run. She put herself forward this spring to fill the Council vacancy left by Chris Ballard in June. At the time, she stressed her experience in Town Hall before she was a realtor, and that is experience she believes would be valuable today.

'I am the only candidate with inside work experience in multiple departments at Town Hall,' she says, noting her work in the Departments of Corporate Services, Bylaw, and Public Works. 'I know how budget decisions are made on the inside, and I have the education and working experience to complement the position and have a good working relationship with Town Hall.'

Looking ahead to the next four years, if she is elected, Ms. Stephens says she believes this experience would be particularly useful in 'keeping our taxes in check'. A critical balance between taxes, services, and ensuring enough money is flowing into Town coffers is now paramount, she says. Aurora is running out of lands to sell, and once that income begins to taper off, it will be more and more difficult to keep taxes in check, particularly for families and seniors.

'Controlling taxes and increasing revenues for the Town are two key points I feel very passionate about, finding additional revenue streams through greater efficiency in Town Facilities,' she says, noting the importance of making Town-owned facilities more readily available for groups to rent during low traffic times. 'There are also the traditional [issues] like congestion in the Downtown Core, and streetscaping, but the bigger challenge is going to be infrastructure. There are a number of areas around Town where

infrastructure is aging. There is going to be a lot of infrastructure coming up for renewal and we need to be very careful about how budgeting is done to protect the taxpayer from massive increases from running out of lands.

?If we lose those development levies we have to find very careful strategies for future budgeting and for the next four years we need to get sharp pencils and get creative on how we are going to generate those additional revenues for the Town so we can see the commercial and residential taxes in check and overall efficiencies to keep taxes in check, and run our internal town budgets sufficiently.?

If elected, Ms. Stephens says she would also like to focus on economic development, and this includes not only attracting more business to Aurora and ensuring everyone knows Aurora is ?open for business?, but providing ?core support? to existing businesses, focusing on business retention. ?Dark space? in many plazas around Town is bad for business, she adds, and that needs to be tackled in earnest.

Although she is clear in her support that Council positions should be full-time, arguing that knocking Council down from eight part time positions to six full time positions could represent a cost savings to Aurora, she has mixed feelings about a ward system for the Town. At one point, she would have said Aurora doesn't need a change in status quo, but with recent growth she says there is now ?some room for dialogue.?

?We have very distinct areas of Town; we have newcomers to the east, we have Old Aurora central, very diverse neighbourhoods to our north versus the south, and we have a great diversity in levels of income, so perhaps a ward system might be something to consider so residents have someone in their immediate neighbourhood they know they can trust and respect.

?Doing this with eight Council seats, there could be four wards and two Councillors per ward, each one with a backup and Councillors working together. I am not ready to shake the tambourines and go right to bat for a ward system, but I think it would be worth some potential dialogue.?