

VOTE 2014: Ballard focuses on "sustainable community"

By Brock Weir

After the first full month of the 2014 election season, most members of Aurora Council have stated their intentions to seek re-election in one way or another, biding their time before formally entering the race.

The same cannot be said for Councillor Chris Ballard. The first-time Councillor is in the unique position of sitting as at the Council table while vying to be the next Liberal candidate for Newmarket-Aurora in the next provincial election.

As such, his political prospects could be vastly different as early as this spring but he is nevertheless focused on the dual tasks at hand ? with much left on his to-do list as Councillor.

Topping the list is seeing the Aurora Promenade Plan fully implemented. The wide-reaching plan to revitalize large swaths of the Yonge and Wellington corridors is expected to be discussed at the Committee level this week before heading to Council next Tuesday.

While the promenade plan has encouraged new development, more needs to be done to encourage business development as well, he says.

“We have to make sure residents can live and shop in Downtown Aurora,” says Councillor Ballard, noting focus needs to also extend beyond the promenade area. “How do we bring new Aurorans, people who have lived here for 10 years or less, primarily in the northeast, and make them an integral part of our community? That will be important to the long-term success of our community.

“If we want Aurora to be more than a place to come and sleep at night before heading back to Toronto for work, we need to make sure all the new families and couples feel welcome and integrated into the social and political life of our community. We haven't done anything to do that this term and I think that is exceptionally unfortunate.”

Over his last three years on Council, Councillor Ballard said he has found his work particularly rewarding, working in the public, helping them to access their local government, as well as local businesses, groups, and organizations. He says he has not, however, found that sense of community at the table where, he argues, personalities all too often enter into the political debate.

“There is, unfortunately, a rift on this Council,” he says. “Many times I feel there are certain Councillors who, no matter what is said, will ultimately disagree because of who is saying it and not necessarily with what is said. That has been the most disappointing aspect of it.

“It has been very fulfilling to represent those citizens who are interested in culture and working to make sure the contract with the Aurora Cultural Centre was maintained. I am a supporter of culture, arts and heritage, and having been immediately involved in designing that business model, I was satisfied that Councillors finally, after a lot of pressure from the public, saw fit to tweak it rather than trash it.”

Additional personal highlights, he said, including highlighting environmental issues such as clear cutting and illegal filling at the south end of Aurora on Yonge Street at Industrial Parkway South, and raising citizens' concerns about the controversial Bell Tower in nearby King Township.

He also said he has found satisfaction in bringing a “sense of fiscal responsibility and community sustainability” to the table in response to some small and big ticket items that have hit the Council table, including extensive renovations to the Aurora Family Leisure Complex to make way for the Community Space for Youth, and the new Joint Operations Centre.

“I haven't always been successful in having fellow Councillors agree with my position, but I think an important part is to at least get

a discussion going when it comes to fiscal responsibility," he said. "While I am in favour of a new operations centre, I am not in favour of spending \$22 or \$35 million with the model that is before us. It speaks to my gravest concern and that is about the financial planning we go through.

"In my mind, we have not made the business case before we spend millions of taxpayers' dollars and that speaks to the long-term sustainability of this Town. Our reserves are in dire straits in some cases and we're moving ahead too quickly, I think, without understanding what we are getting this Town into in the long-term. I have real concerns and I think Councils over the next two or three terms are going to face challenges to deal with these financial decisions."

In the meantime, until either Premier Kathleen Wynne, Ontario's opposition parties, or the Newmarket-Aurora's Ontario Liberal Riding Association decide otherwise ? and the local nomination date is set for February 20 ? Councillor Ballard says he remains focused on the community.

"I am really focused on being a municipal Councillor and working with people on that in Town," he said. "Other than that, I haven't thought any further than September."