

VOTE 2014: For better or worse, Barb Barker has had a front-row seat to Downtown development



By Brock Weir

Barb Barker hasn't entered the race to be a Councillor for the Town of Aurora on a whim.

It neared the top of her bucket list over a decade ago, but before she was able to throw her hat into the ring, life intervened.

After her husband's death eight years ago, she was left to put two children through university while still a few years shy before she was eligible for early retirement from the CIBC branch just south of Yonge and Wellington. But, with her kids grown, and retired as of February, now is the right time.

"I have lived in Aurora for 33 years and have seen a lot of changes in Town - some for the best, some not - but I would love to make a difference," she says.

From her seat at CIBC, Ms. Barker had a front row seat to the various changes that have taken place in Aurora's Downtown Core. She says she has seen a business area "sadly lacking," with stores and businesses struggling to stay relevant and vibrant. As more businesses were built spreading out towards the 404, core businesses took a hit and this is something she would like to combat if elected on October 27.

"We have had a pretty good Council and Mayor in the Town and now it is time to bring in some new blood," she says, noting her time sitting on a committee which helped to form the Aurora Promenade Study, a vision for the Yonge and Wellington Corridors. "My main goal is to look at the future, to keep our youth continuing to live in Aurora and not running away from Aurora, and also to make things accessible, to make this a self-sufficient Town, and to get things [to] where people can be proud to shop, live and work in the Aurora area.

"Perhaps one of the biggest challenges [of this race] is to get people to understand what is needed and to improve the Downtown Core. We need to get more companies involved and industries to come into Aurora to actually fill up spaces that are empty. I'm looking at the south end of Town and it is alive and well, but I am looking at the north end of Town and it needs help and assistance to get it going."

North of the Downtown Core, however, is one particular project which excites Ms. Barker. As a long-time volunteer with community groups such as Scouts Canada, Guides, and Air Cadets, she comes honestly by her conviction that it is important to

entice youth to stay in Aurora. Going a significant way towards this goal, she says, is the redevelopment of the Aurora Family Leisure Complex to accommodate Community Space for Youth.

Ms. Barker says she has been a vocal advocate for a youth centre in Aurora for nearly 20 years. After years of "talking, and talking, and talking," it is finally becoming a reality.

"I was thrilled [when it was approved] because that way parents would know where their youth are and they wouldn't be wandering the streets at night, as well as the opportunities it would offer to youth," she says. "Maybe it could offer them employment opportunities to teach them what it is all about. Maybe helping the youth in that regard to be better trained, it could provide opportunities for them wanting to open up little businesses in Town."

A youth centre would also provide an opportunity for the many youth groups and clubs already existing in Aurora to have a place to come together, share resources, and be a one-stop-shop for all the activities going on around Town.

"I have been 100 per cent behind this," she says. "Yes, it is costing money to fix the infrastructure, but it was done 30 years ago. It is time for it to be changed. What better way than to add on and improve it anyway because it is money well spent for youth will be able to utilize it, along with families as well."

Such spaces would also benefit Aurora's seniors, she said, leading towards a more inclusive community. To this end, Ms. Barker says she has heard from residents who believe a smaller scale grocery store within walking distance to those living in the Downtown Area might just be a significant contributing factor in Downtown redevelopment.

Once people are down there, however, it is time to look at the broader picture. This includes a complete review of traffic lights in the area, particularly advance lefts for people looking to turn onto Wellington Street from Yonge and vice versa.

"I am honest and upfront with the way I feel," says Ms. Barker. "I am not wasteful of taxpayers' dollars. I work for the underdog, but I do listen and try to do, to the best of my ability, to assist them. I have been a resident here for 33 years, I love it, and would never move anywhere else."