

VOTE 2014: Gaertner wants to fight for Moraine if re-elected this fall

By Brock Weir

Campaigning for her third term on Council in 2010, Wendy Gaertner wanted to help strengthen Oak Ridges Moraine legislation when it came up for review.

Although that is still pending by the end of 2015, she remains firm in her mandate. Councillor Gaertner says she will again seek re-election this year to be part of the debate she has followed so closely.

"The plan was put in place to protect the environmental functioning of this crucial natural feature, which lies partly within our borders and I hope to be part of the political team that works to keep the Moraine safe from developmental damage," she says.

Although seeking re-election with an environmental mandate, her view of this Council term is less than rosy. In the last Council term, the phrase "Gang of Six" was bandied about often as, more often than not, major decisions around the Council table came down in a 6 ? 3 split. Not much has changed, just the players, and this term Councillor Gaertner has found herself on the other side of the equation.

"I'm almost always in the minority [and] it is hard not to get discouraged, but you can't allow that," she says. "I was elected to do what I thought would be right for the community. I have to keep presenting my point of view, even though I know that I might fail to convince. I believe dissenting opinions are of value in a democracy."

Looking back on her time on Council, she says she has always held the "democratic principles of accountability, accessibility, and transparency" close to her heart. Unfortunately, she claims, she has not always had the opportunity to put those in action.

"Too much of our business has been done behind closed doors without full public disclosure," she says. "This doesn't allow for the public to hold their politicians accountable for their actions."

Among these issues, she says, are land sales and deals, particularly when it comes to the servicing of business lands on Leslie Street, currently on the market by the Town.

"This is the most secretive Council I have been on," she says. "I want to bring as many of the resolved issues as I can out of closed session for public information. How can people assess how well we have represented the community if they don't know all the details of what we have done?"

"Another thing that is very important to me, and I have been a little attacked at the table for this, is continuing to insist our employment lands produce as many new, permanent, full-time well-paying jobs for our citizens as possible. Not only will this help keep our taxes from rising drastically, it will allow many more of us to live, work, and play in our own community. In my mind, warehouses and fitness facilities are not what we need to support employment or tax health."

Also coming under close scrutiny by Councillor Gaertner are continuing renovations at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex (AFLC), as well as mounting costs of the proposed Joint Operations Centre. With the latter, she says although she has always been supportive of a new works yard, costs in this proposal have "gotten way out of control", the same can be said, she adds, of the AFLC renovations.

The problem, she says, is renovations were supposed to accommodate a Community Space for Youth, but youth space will clock in at less than two per cent of the renovations.

Councillor Gaertner spent 18 years running Hot Spot, a youth drop in centre, which eventually folded in the previous Council term. Although she says that doesn't make her an expert on the subject, it does provide a degree of insight into youth needs.

?Putting a small space into a large building that has no separate entrance, that has no feeling for the youth that is in their space,? she says. ?It is a mistake. I hope I will be proved wrong, but I really think this was [went about] in the wrong way. It is not a youth centre and it is certainly not the youth centre the community has been asking for since the late 1960s.?

So, why come back for more?

In addition to wanting to have her say in any future development of Moraine legislation, and bringing details of land deals out into the public, she says there is much left to do, including making the Aurora Council chamber accessible to everyone, particularly people in wheelchairs, and continuing to advocate for high quality job creation.

Looking back at this term, she says she is proud of her work advocating for the Aurora Cultural Centre, for retaining the Town's citizen advisory committees, and, although unsuccessful, providing her support for the Aurora jazz+ Festival.

But there is also a deeper reason.

?This has been the most stressful, lowest paying and most interesting job I have ever had,? she says. ?It's true ? politics kind of gets in your blood.?