

?What got you here won?t get you there? ? Outgoing Mayor Geoff Dawe reflects on eight years



By Brock Weir

?We went from being a punchline to a headline,? is a mantra that Geoff Dawe stuck with through the last two municipal election campaigns and, now that his time as Mayor of Aurora is drawing to a close, it is something he holds as one of his biggest personal achievements in Aurora's top job.

Dawe, who was first elected Mayor in 2010, and was re-elected once again in 2014, was unseated from the job October 22 by incumbent Councillor Tom Mrakas, who secured his position as Aurora's next mayor with 38.33 per cent of the vote, compared to Dawe's 28.33.

?I am not sure you can say where it went wrong, because it is going to sound like an excuse on my part and it would be a slap against them's that one,? says Dawe.

This election campaign, he says, was ?very much about getting out the vote,? and, in the end, he says about 2,000 fewer voters turned out this time around compared to four years go. He'll never know, he says, whether those 2,000 votes would have made ?a substantial difference? in the race, but throughout the process Dawe says he felt a sense of ?complacency? in the air.

?I [kept hearing], ?there's no issue, you'll be elected no problem,? he recalls. ?Quite frankly, that was one of my major concerns because a low turnout typically favours the incumbent, but I would suggest it typically favours the person who has managed to create a sense of urgency that, for whatever reason, change is needed. Whether people were complacent, whether it was apathy, those are not particularly nice words, but there is no getting around the fact there were fewer voters. One of the reasons we went to internet voting was to increase our turnout, but instead we dropped. There has got to be something else to get people engaged in the process.?

Looking back on the months leading up to election day, Dawe says there are instances in hindsight where he says he wish he would have pushed back on harder.

?I can think of any number of missed opportunities where I could have slammed [my opponents] but it has never been in my nature and it is hard to make that change,? he says. ?If that is a failing, that's it. The two major traits I think you need for this job is you have to be professionally objective and have appropriate empathy. Whoever gets in, you have to work with them. I have always been of the opinion you treat people with respect and you move on. You don't take the opportunity to knife people in the back.?

These are traits he says that have served him well during his time in office. While the next few weeks leading up to the end of the term will be spent making sure there are no outstanding items to deal with, he says he will be proud of changing the perception of the office of mayor in this Town.

?I have had a number of emails that referred to the fact changing the style of leadership at the Town brought a level of calmness, a level of professionalism and a level of objectivity that hadn't been seen in a while,? he says. ?The Town is not rocket science. We are, in my opinion, essentially a service organization. That's what we do: we provide services as our core function. We do other

things as well, but we plow the roads, we pick up the garbage, we cut the grass, we create parks and recreational facilities. Our job is to provide the best possible services at the best possible price.?

When he was first elected, Dawe says he told people that if the Town of Aurora was going to be in the paper, it might as well be in the paper ?for the right reasons and not the wrong reasons.? These ?right reasons? over the past eight years include, he said, taking Aurora from a community that didn't make the cut in MoneySense Magazine's Top Places to Live in Canada to a comfortable spot in the Top 25, moving forward on Library Square, and getting development intensification into the Downtown Core.

He's also proud, he says, of fostering a ?cohesive Council and a period of good growth in Aurora.?

?We're assigned growth. We're given that number, which we actually haven't met,? he says. ?We're under performing, according to our Official Plan. That is one of the things that drove me crazy [during the campaign]. That we've moved forward on growth that was given to us in a manner that is, for the most part, manageable and effective.?

An outstanding concern is the proposed condominium development, Metropolitan Square, proposed for the northeast corner of Wellington Street East and Industrial Parkway North which came to Council with just 10 affordable housing units included. This was rejected as too few by Council, but Dawe says it is more than Aurora has now.

?We could have gone ahead with what I consider to be a really nice development that looked good,? he says. ?[The developer] can come back in, he has already got development permission, he can put up some very boring box building and he doesn't need our permission. By thinking a little more creatively and what is the long-term benefit, we could have had, I think, hopefully a much nicer development that what might possibly be there.?

Looking ahead to the next four years, Dawe says there is disappointment he won't be able to see the development of Library Square, the renovation of the historic Aurora Armoury into a campus of Niagara College's Canadian Food & Wine Institute, and driving further development into the Downtown come to fruition. The same can be said of negotiations with the Province to bring vacant land on Bloomington Road to the Town for recreational use, primarily as a site for a possible new sports and recreation complex that could be built in partnership with King and Richmond Hill.

But, in the end, voters decided on change October 22. Dawe says that after his term wraps on November 30, he hopes to remain engaged with the community, exploring the opportunity to serve on various Boards in and around Aurora. Previously asked to run as a candidate for the Progressive Conservatives in the 2014 Municipal Election, Dawe doesn't rule out seeking political opportunities in the future, but he does nix the idea of running for Chair of the Region of York as long as incumbent chair Wayne Emmerson is in the running.

When asked what advice he would give to Mayor-Elect Mrakas, Mayor Dawe says, ?What got you here won't get you there.?
It's a totally different job running to be the mayor as opposed to being the mayor. It comes back to what my definition of leadership is as opposed to other people's leadership. I think there is a great parallel to a wolf pack. Humans and wolves are both predatory animals. If you look at how a wolf pack travels, the most infirm are at the front of the pack and they set the pace. Then you have a group of very strong wolves that protect the front and the body in the middle. Then you have a group of very strong wolves at the end and the leader is behind that to make sure there is no one left behind and to try and put it together. That is how I have always conducted myself. It is not about me being the leader, it is about the body being led. That's my advice: understand the difference. Easier said than done.

?Being Mayor is the most fascinating thing I have ever done, and I have a number of opportunities in my life to have different positions and do different jobs. It is the most fascinating thing I will ever do, it is probably the most intense thing I have ever done up until this point. Every day is the same and every day is different. You are never really sure what is going to land on your desk. There have been some incredible opportunities to meet some really, really nice people, people who truly care about their communities and people who want to do good.?