

Candidates square off at Chamber debate

By Mark PavilonsEditor

Four candidates vying to be King-Vaughan's next MPP squared off in a lively debate last week. The packed house of residents filled the King City Seniors' Centre at the all-candidates' meeting sponsored by the King Chamber of Commerce. The candidates fielded prepared questions by the Chamber, to reflect concerns of local businesses. Each candidate received time for opening and closing remarks, and answered the questions presented. Stephen Lecce, PC candidate, said he ran to ensure that King was never left behind and received full support. He has been present, worked hard across party lines and produced results - GO station expansion in King City; improved water for Schomberg; the creation of the Cortellucci Vaughan Hospital and upcoming expansion of Southlake, and the King Township Wide Recreation Centre. He pointed out he's the first MPP with an office in King, and he's brought integrity and energy to the job. NDP candidate Samantha Sanchez said life is hard for all residents and especially young people. She pointed to the high cost of gas and "unattainable" house prices. Leader Andrea Horwath is ready to "fix things," she said, and she wants to be the local voice at Queen's Park. Liberal Gillian Vivona said she will bring "respect" to the job and residents deserve respect from their representative. She will ask residents what they want and need. The Liberals, she said, have a fully costed plan and they vow to reduce class sizes; hire 100,000 additional health care workers; build 1.5 million new homes; increase old age security; boost home care; stop Highway 413. "You are my focus, my priority," she told the crowd. New Blue candidate Michael Di Mascolo said he became more involved during the pandemic lockdown in 2021. Concerned about delays experienced by students in their education, he and New Blue want to turn things around, reversing many PC decisions and mandates, including pandemic restrictions. Candidates were asked about dealing with pandemic recovery, and addressing labour shortages. Lecce said it's obvious there aren't enough skilled workers and the solution starts in schools. They've changed the curriculum to provide students with real life job skills. He admitted the cost of living is out of control and the PCs have a plan to help put more money back in the pockets of Ontarians. "The elimination of automobile stickers was just one move. PCs also vow to cut the gas tax and lower tuition rates. Sanchez said the NDP plan to raise the minimum wage to \$20 by 2026 and commit to promoting the skilled trades through training. The NDP also vow to increase "green" jobs and help reduce the carbon footprint. Vivona noted there are many pieces to the Liberal plan that address affordability. She also said they will reverse the lack of progress in our school curriculum by bringing back shop classes, once a mainstay of high school learning. The Liberals will also increase paid sick days and Vivona noted when workers feel secure they will come to work with renewed vigor. The Liberals also want to get internationally trained workers jobs quickly. The more people working will lead to increased spending and that will fuel economic recovery. Di Mascolo said they would never lock down the economy and the party would vow to "stop printing money." We currently have the lowest unemployment rate in history, which means the economy is rebounding, he said. We need to attract and retain skilled trades and work to improve the quality of life to create a society free of infringements. The candidates were asked about their party plans to stimulate economic growth. Vivona said small businesses need to feel secure and the Liberals would eliminate the corporate income tax and offer millions in loan guarantees. Their Grow Ontario Fund will help start-ups. The Liberals would also implement \$10 per day daycare and improve the flow of inter-provincial trade. The Liberals' housing plan would also create jobs. Di Mascolo said unfortunately, many are leaving Ontario and he said the number of voters in King-Vaughan has actually dropped by 1,000 since the last election. The PCs created an atmosphere where people are leaving. New Blue plans to support businesses, instead of using them as "scapegoats." Lecce admitted we have to do something better to get goods to market, and that's why the PCs have invested in needed infrastructure, increased funding to schools and hospitals. They've removed a lot of red tape to help level the playing field and they've built needed facilities. Vivona said people should be able to live where they grew up and the Liberals will work with local municipal councils to remove MZOs and cancel the 413, things residents don't want. Di Mascolo said infrastructure spending is vital. New Blue is in favour of a new highway (referring to the 413), but not in its current form or route. He questioned the money slated to be spent on a highway that runs parallel to the 407. New Blue would also make lobbying of politicians illegal to eliminate influence. Lecce said we have to look ahead. The PCs have pledged \$1 billion over the next five years for roads, bridges and water improvements. The party has demonstrated and delivered with a critical injection of infrastructure funding, all to help improve the quality of life of residents. Sanchez noted the 413 will have devastating impacts on the Oak Ridges Moraine and "we need to stop this." The NDP vows to reinvest tax dollars back into the local economy. She promises to work with local communities and address

local concerns. When asked about plans to improve the environment and tackle climate change, Di Mascolo said they oppose carbon taxes because it places an undue burden on taxpayers. "Every decision we make needs to take the environment into consideration," he remarked. He supports highway funding but says the 413 needs to be rerouted. Lecce said the previous government carved up the greenbelt, but we can now grow the economy and still preserve greenspace. By focusing on transit, electric vehicle charging stations and electric vehicle battery production, it will protect the environment and lower emissions. The PCs, he stressed, oppose carbon taxes. Sanchez noted climate change needs to be addressed quickly and the NDP plan to achieve a net zero emission level by 2050. They would reinstate the rebates on EVs and expand the greenbelt. They would also reduce single use plastics and encourage the planting of more trees across the province. Vivona said the Liberals will expand the greenbelt, create several new provincial parks, thereby creating jobs. They would also phase out natural gas plants; restrict single use plastics and make EVs mandatory for all public sector employees. The Liberals would also reduce gas taxes. Regarding plans to improve education, Lecce reiterated that by giving students job skills, it will breathe new life into the economy. He pointed out the PCs updated the provincial curriculum for the first time in more than a decade. They introduced more programs and upped funding. Money to school boards will again increase by 9% next year. The PCs will give students the tools they need, which will foster hope and opportunity. He pointed out he's the youngest education minister in Ontario's history and he's made many inroads during difficult times. Sanchez said students suffered through the pandemic and NDP would overhaul the education funding formula. They would also remove interest payments on education loans. Vivona, a 40-year teacher, pointed out education is not just about getting a job. We need well rounded citizens and the Liberals would increase funding to not only education, but the arts. They would hire 10,000 more teaching, special ed and ECE workers. Di Mascolo said higher education needs to be accessible to all who need it. New Blue would make post-secondary education more affordable. They would also offer tax credits to students and funding would follow them throughout their educational journey. When it comes to health care funding and staffing, Sanchez said the NDP have a plan to recruit and retain health care workers and boost services for underserved parts of the province. They would also allow internationally trained nurses to get to work. Part of the NDP platform is to improve funding and monitoring of the long-term care system. Vivona said the Liberals have a concrete plan, and the first step would be to repeal Bill 124. Health Care workers, she said, are the front-line heroes and they need more respect from the government. The Liberals would clear the surgical backlog, hire more PSAs and increase the number of hospital beds. They also favour giving pharmacists more leeway and promote drug coverage and benefits for all Ontario workers. Di Mascolo said we have to restore dignity to health care treatment and clear the backlogs. We have to reconcile past mistakes. He criticized the government for ignoring staff cuts to Southlake in 2020 during the pandemic. Lecce said they will hire more nurses and doctors. The improvements right here in the riding - Mackenzie Health, Southlake and Cortellucci Vaughan - attest to the government's commitment to improving health care. The PCs have also increase mental health funding and committed to 500 new LTC beds - more than any previous government has done. "The PCs will not only reduce taxes, but increase services and grow the economy. When asked about taxation and small business support, Vivona said tax reductions, changes to HST and cuts to gas taxes will all help boost the economy. Di Mascolo said New Blue would impose a 3% cut to the HST and introduce a graduated tax system on large business, similar to income taxes. The multi-million-dollar corporations can should more of the burden, he pointed out. Lecce said the PCs have a track record of cutting taxes, while increasing service levels. They're committed to redirection taxes to help families and put money back - in your pocket. "The PCs reduced gas taxes and we'll do it again. " Their plan to stay open is realistic and will make life more affordable. Sanchez said the NDP will kick-start the economy by continuing pandemic support payments through 2023. The candidates summarized their positions to wrap up the meeting. Lecce said we need leaders who fight to get things done. He made a commitment to do just that and the province made progress. He also stayed focused on his constituents. Sanchez encouraged residents to vote for someone who stands by the electorate and who will help make life more affordable. She said she's fed up and every deserves better and to fix what's broken. Vivona reiterated that the Liberals will reinstate respect and it takes more than ribbon cuttings to get things done. The Liberal plan was created through input from hundreds of thousands of citizens. "We need to think about everyone and not just what's convenient," she said.