

Candidates address important issues at meeting

By Angela Gismondi

Constituents had the opportunity to ask questions of their local candidates just one week before the municipal election as Concerned Citizens of King Township hosted a candidates meeting for Wards 1, 2 and 5 at Villanova College in King City Monday.

When asked about their top priorities if elected, Ward 5 incumbent Debbie Schaefer said she plans to build on the work that council has started over the past four years and would like to continue to influence how the Township evolves.

"I want to execute the strategies we have formulated this council," said Schaefer. "It's how we are going to achieve our vision of being an idyllic countryside community of communities. I need to make sure I'm hearing what the community is saying."

Ward 5 candidate Chris Gafoor pointed out that council didn't actually devise the plans, they hired third party consultants and spent a lot of money to do so. If elected, he will focus on engaging the public.

"It's important that we engage everybody, not a select few," he noted.

As a newcomer to the community, Gafoor said he brings creativity, old-fashioned common sense and a voice of reason.

"I will bring a fresh new perspective to King Township and ideas that have been turned into reality in many rural towns and villages across the world," said Gafoor. "I have a vision for King."

Ward 2 incumbent Peter Grandilli, said he has a proven track record. Along with council, he has been advocating for a bypass around Nobleton to divert heavy trucks from travelling through town. Council has accomplished a lot of things together over the past four years and saved taxpayers a lot of money, he added.

"I get the job done," said Grandilli, adding he is always available to help. "I have always put Nobleton first and will continue to do so."

Ward 5 candidate Anna Roberts said there needs to be more transparency and that will be her top priority.

"We need to be more visible to you, the taxpayer, and be more accessible and accountable," said Roberts. "We need to do what makes sense for the entire community."

She believes her experience working for a large financial institution is beneficial, especially when managing the township's finances.

"One of my strengths is my passion for customer service," said Roberts. "I believe these qualities will enable me to work with the community and get involved and make a decision that benefits everyone."

Ward 2 candidate David Boyd wants to improve communication within the Township and to engage the entire community.

"I've got the feeling there is a loss of hope and we need a new commitment, a new representative and I am ready to commit to you and move us forward," said Boyd, adding as a volunteer firefighter, he has experience working with council to get things done. "I have clear and effective communication skills. When elected, I will use tax dollars effectively. I will identify problems and seek solutions within King and neighbouring communities."

Jim Streb, candidate for Ward 2, said he has 14 concrete ideas to improve the community.

"After listening to your concerns, I have a pretty good idea of what needs to be accomplished in this ward," said Streb. "As a homeowner, I share those concerns."

Ward 2 candidate Joe Buscema, plans to focus his energy on combating speeding on residential streets.

"Speeding is the number one concern and that's what I'm going to concentrate on first," he said.

As a former resident of larger municipalities, Buscema wants to see Nobleton keep its small town charm and protect its natural resources like the Oak Ridges Moraine.

"The last thing I want to see is for Nobleton to develop into anything close to Maple," said Buscema. "If we want to go to a shopping mall, we'll drive there and drive back."

The public was given the opportunity to ask questions at the meeting. The first question was directed at Roberts and Gafoor, asking how they feel they can represent the constituents of King when they haven't attended council meetings or sat on any boards.

As a volunteer at the King City Lodge, Roberts said she could bring her personal and volunteer experience to the position.

"I have not attended many meetings but now that I am a resident of King, that will definitely change," she said. "The experience that I have will bring added value to the community."

Gafoor said he has been working to provide for his family, as most 30-somethings do.

"I work with change every single day and I know how to manage change," explained Gafoor.

When asked if they live in Ward 5, Gafoor said he lives in the heart of the ward while Roberts said she bought a house in the ward but is not living there yet.

"Whether we're living in King or not, we understand what is happening here," Roberts responded.

"My wife and I moved here for King's quality of life and we're seeing that threatened," said Gafoor.

Debbie Schaefer agreed and added that concept is not a new one.

"That is why the current council has prepared a road map on how we're going to achieve our vision and our plan," Schaefer noted.

One of the local issues that was brought up was whether the candidates are for or against the use of train whistles. If they wanted to get rid of the whistles, they were asked how they would fund it.

"I like train whistles, personally," said Gafoor, adding it wakes his wife in the morning. "It's part of King's heritage. It depends what the community wants to see happen to train whistles."

Taxation or crowd funding initiatives would be used to fund the removal of the whistles, he said.

Going door-to-door, Schaefer has heard a lot of complaints regarding the train whistles. She pointed out it is under federal regulations and would cost between \$100,000 and \$200,000 to eliminate.

"It can be done but there are a lot of steps to go through," said Schaefer. "We have to decide how to spend taxpayer dollars and if we're prepared to accept the safety implications."

Roberts said safety is her main concern.

"I don't know if it would be my top priority," she said. "When it comes to health and safety I feel the safety of the community should be the priority."

King City resident Jean Kell asked candidates how they would address the need for seniors housing, and possibly an aging in place facility, in town. She pointed out that King City Lodge is too small and currently up for sale and that new condos in the area do not provide the care seniors might require.

Roberts, who volunteers at the King City Lodge, said she is worried about the seniors being displaced if it closes.

"When I found out it was for sale, it broke my heart," said Roberts. "These people have worked hard and deserve to stay in their community."

Gafoor pointed out that while the new condos are beautiful, they are not very accessible for seniors.

"There are very few places the seniors can walk," said Gafoor, adding the King Road and Keele Street area is not very pedestrian friendly.

He noted that the Township has purchased the old Holy Name school property and plans to turn it into a civic centre.

"I think that would be a great place to have a civic centre with trails and activities for the seniors community," said Gafoor.

Schaefer explained the vision was to put an aging in place facility at the corporate centre but the Township was informed by the Ontario Municipal Board that the current institutional zoning does not allow for that type of facility. She suggested that needs to be reviewed as part of the Township's Official Plan review.

"Indeed we should be delivering that kind of a facility," she added.

Buscema said his mother is in a private facility in Newmarket.

"It's a wonderful place but it's a lot of money," he said. "If there is a need, there is a need and we should look at getting something like that here."

As a senior himself, Grandilli recognizes the need for more housing.

"Now that the sewers are in Nobleton, when elected, I will promote the expansion of the Nobleton Seniors' Centre," said Grandilli.

As a former member of the Seniors Advisory Committee in King, Marina Ferrante asked the candidates if they plan to advocate for more accommodations for seniors in the Township.

Schaefer responded she has asked that opportunities for legal apartments and in-law suites be included in the Official Plan review.

She added that the Township has already been working on addressing the zoning issue on the future corporate centre site to allow for an aging in place facility.

Gafoor said the problem is the high cost of property and development charges in King City.

"Zoning is minor compared to the cost of King City's real estate ? it's 60 per cent higher than our neighbours," he noted. "Who is going to develop it, that is the question."

Roberts said she plans to work closely with the provincial and federal governments to bring the much needed facilities to King.

Transportation and traffic in King City was also discussed at the meeting.

Mayor Steve Pellegrini, who has been acclaimed, attended the meeting and stepped in to field the question.

"The previous council unanimously put forward a resolution for a bypass for King City and Nobleton," explained the Mayor. "York Region is looking at east-west connections as well to address that. It's one of the unfortunate affects of growth all around us ? they use our streets and we have to pay for them."

Ward 1 Councillor Cleve Mortelliti, who has also been acclaimed, was on-hand at the meeting. He opposed uploading the 15th and

18th Sideroads to the region because he didn't want them to turn into highways.

They got uploaded and paved and are very good for commuters," Mortelliti stated.

Nobleton resident Nancy Hopkinson explained some of the communities in King have two representatives. She asked if the candidates would push for two representatives for Nobleton through a ward boundary realignment process.

"I don't think we're there yet," said Buscema. "There is a lot more development to come. At some point I could see splitting it up but not at the moment."

"At the moment I think we have too many councillors for the population," said Grandilli. "I would eliminate two councillors."

"I think we're adequately represented at this point and the cost benefit is not there yet," Boyd explained.

Streb added that while Nobleton is growing, so are King City and Schomberg. He said the Township has to look at the number of voters in each ward and make sure they are all adequately represented.

While she can't vote yet, 15-year-old Tessia Orlandi asked candidates what they would do to get young people involved in politics.

"It's so important that we engage young people," said Gafoor, commending the student for coming forward. "The young population generally does not trust government. We need role models - we're building our community for them."

Boyd has made it his mission to engage young voters in the process. Three high school volunteers have been working on his campaign.

"I hope they go back to their high schools and tell their classes how they got involved," said Boyd. "Campaigns are a vehicle to get youth involved."

Roberts said creating student employment opportunities at town hall gives students a chance to see what goes on behind the scenes.

Schaefer suggested working with community groups geared towards youth.

Streb said getting youth input on various Township initiatives and projects, such as the community park in Nobleton, is vital.

Buscema pointed out that children don't stay small forever and once they get into their teen years they need things to do and places to go close to home.

"It's something we really need to think about," he said.

Mortelliti said he introduced a "Mayor for the Month" program in his first term of council but for some reason, it didn't take off.

"I would be happy to bring that forward again," he said. "I saw it as a really great thing for our youth - I think we need to get our kids excited about politics."

Katherine Markle asked candidates how they plan to maintain the farming and horse industry which is so vital to King.

Schaefer said the Township needs to take advantage of the upcoming provincial review of conservation plans slated for next year.

She would like to see council put together strong recommendations to support both farmers and the equine industry.

Gafoor said farming and the equine industry in King need better marketing and that they could help the township increase tourism.

"The agricultural and equine industries are vital not only to the heritage but also to the economy of King Township," said Gafoor.

"It's there but it's not positioned correctly, it's not marketed."

Schaefer responded that is the reason the Township has a tourism strategy in place. She added a lot of people are now taking day trips, which really fits in with what King has to offer.

Streb noted the agricultural industry doesn't just benefit the rural areas in King.

"It makes a big difference to the Ward 2 village and we want to help in any way we can," he stated.

The Township needs to do whatever it can to support the farmers and the equine industry, including promoting them to other levels of government, Boyd said.

A Nobleton resident asked about the increasing cost of sewers. She pointed out that the first phase cost about \$18,000 while her connection is estimated to cost \$32,000.

"To get the price down we are waiting for more developers to come in and put more contributions to infrastructure," Grandilli explained, adding the Township is also looking to apply for government funding. "The longer we wait the higher goes the price."

According to Streb, the project was mishandled from the beginning, but the damage is done.

"It's unfair but right now I have no idea how that can be fixed," said Streb.

Buscema agreed.

"I wasn't around so I can't speak to how it went down, but it's a mess," said Buscema.

Boyd heard a lot of complaints about the sewer costs while campaigning. He told constituents he would get answers about the allocations if he is elected.

The municipal election is Monday, Oct. 27.