

Roads, traffic top issues among candidates

By Mark PavilonsEditor

Roads and traffic were the top issues among candidates seeking election in King. The passion and desire to contribute was quite evident, at the final all-candidates' event, sponsored by the King Chamber of Commerce last week. A robust and genuine discussion took place at The Country Day School, among those vying for a council seat. Candidates were given time to introduce themselves and their platforms. They all bring unique skill sets to the table and all vowed to listen to constituents and help make a difference. The candidates answered three prepared questions submitted ahead of time by Chamber members.

If elected, what would be your top 2 priorities for King Township and how would you work to address them?

Ward 4 candidate Mary Asselstine said she wants to engage constituents and during her campaign asked residents if they feel they have a say in local decision making. Most said yes, but they were unsure whether anyone was listening. She vowed to connect with her residents via a monthly email newsletter, host open houses and workshops. She'd like to look into a permanent 'constituency' office that will provide a meeting place to exchange ideas and concerns. Becky Eveson, also a Ward 4 candidate, noted she's adamant about getting youth involved; creating an accessible and safe community, and being environmentally and fiscally responsible. All of her campaign materials were environmentally friendly and will be recycled or repurposed. She also launched a 'Youth Kindness Club' which brought together local young people to volunteer and raise funds for the accessible park in Schomberg. It is important that we have future generations that will continue to support them. I have already reached out to several organizations and charities to identify how a group of youth would be able to offer support,' she said. Candidate Simon Lloyd wants residents to have a strong voice and he will work with all stakeholders. He would apply his business knowledge on council to keep an eye on tax dollars and try to attract new businesses to King. 'I'm adamant that we have to be very careful how Township funds are managed, and provide true value to the taxpayers,' he said. He also hopes to boost public amenities in the ward, such as walkable areas, pathways, sidewalks and trails. Michael Lovisotto said he wants to tackle traffic and speeding, both in Ward 4 and across King. He will work to ensure that King continues to grow at a sustainable level, one that works with nature and not against it. He would put Ward 4 needs at the forefront of every conversation, pushing for greater police presence, and working on traffic calming measures. Incumbent Ward 5 Councillor Debbie Schaefer said traffic is the top priority. The Transportation Master Plan is a valuable tool, but doesn't address the challenges of the arterial roads and impact on King City. The increased traffic is creating some serious safety issues and she said solutions require a plan. Through her 12 years on council. Schaefer said she sees a bit of a disconnect between the Township and its residents and businesses. She wants to 'strike the right balance' between leveraging technology for meetings and traditional in-person gatherings. Opponent Michael Di Mascolo said ensuring safety of residents on residential streets is a top concern. He wants to focus on building a strong sense of community that celebrates diverse rural, agricultural and city core living and business opportunities that King Township has to offer. He pointed to a 43% in vehicles thefts in York in the past year and he wants to work with police to find strategies to curb this. He also wants local traffic calming measures, including cameras and speed boards. Di Mascolo wants to build a strong sense of community through awareness and celebration. He wants more streetscaping and beautification to attract more visitors. Ward 1 incumbent Jordan Cescolini said he wants to maximize the use of tax dollars and will work with council to keep tax increases as low as possible. The Township has implemented many efficiencies and cost-saving measures and he will work to ensure these continue. Ward 1 candidate Nick Seretis said alleviating traffic congestion is the top priority, along with expanding business opportunities. He would like to see an off-ramp of Highway 400 north of King Road, to re-route traffic. He refers to this as the 'Burton Grove-Patricia Warren Bypass.' This would create an opportunity for industrial and commercial applications along the 400 corridor. He also sees the affordable housing crisis as a major issue. By allowing development along this corridor, it could be a site for affordable housing to address the shortage. He also believes King Road, between Keele and Dufferin, require more infrastructure investment by both the Township and the Region of York. 'If the proper road infrastructure is in place, there is a much bigger potential for all sorts of new retail ventures and restaurants to open and thrive on Keele St and King Road,' he said. Ryan Raymond, Ward 3 candidate, said housing diversity is necessary locally. He would support more condos, with underground parking and geothermal systems. He said he spoke to the mayor of Essex where they build net-zero, eco-friendly

homes. They have homes with Secondary Dwelling Units (SDUs) providing rental income. He also wants to see a plan in place to repair and pave roads. Speeding and dangerous passing are concerns and people shouldn't feel unsafe pulling out of their driveways. Adam Pham, also a Ward 3 candidate, said I want to see a long-term goal and a 25-year and a 50-year vision to develop this township. He also wants to unlock the land alongside the 400, King, Keele, Jane, and Dufferin to accommodate the medium population growth. He also vows to keep Oak Ridges Moraines and Holland Marsh as nature and agriculture reserves by encouraging and incentivizing farmers to make more organic products for the long run. In agricultural areas, he would support allowing farmers to build a second house for immediate family members. Jennifer Anstey for Ward 3 said taxes are an issue. In the 2022 budget, King Township staff have indicated that based on current projections the budget will need to increase by 4.62% for 2023, 4.41% for 2024, and 3.56% for 2025. Funding this will require a tax increase to residents who already pay a premium to live in the community. As a councillor with a solid financial background, I will diligently review proposed projects and expenditures to help council make responsible decisions with your tax dollars. She also sees housing as a concern, and we need a better mix of options in settlement areas. Incumbent Jakob Schneider said he will continue to push for widespread internet access in rural areas. He's made it a point during his term to improve many roads in Ward 3 and he will continue to ensure more gravel to asphalt conversion.

Do you support encouraging future employment growth within King Township and, if so, what kind of jobs would you like to see coming to King and how would you propose to attract them?

Seretis said King Township is uniquely positioned to accommodate all business sectors. Farmers play the most essential role in society, and we need to promote and subsidize farming and make it attractive as the demand for food increases with population growth and the availability of land decreases through development. We also need to expand our agricultural tourism and provide job opportunities at farms and promote fairs, festivals and farmer's markets. He would also like to see an increase of corporate and industrial jobs. I believe in shop local and supporting our local businesses. We have a rare opportunity to make our local businesses a destination point as well. We need to be coming up with plans to attract customers from outside the immediate vicinity. He said the intersection of Keele St. and King Rd. and the adjacent properties are of the utmost importance. We must do everything we can to promote and grow this area for a retail and hospitality destination. Cescolini said he's been an advocate for employment growth and King's OP designates employment lands. He's a strong believer in collaborating with companies interested in coming to King. He'd like to see a variety of businesses from retail through industrial to appeal to all skill levels of employees. He's committed to sustainable growth in King. Anstey said with the recent addition of high-speed internet being integrated into the Township, there is no end to the type of businesses that King can attract, particularly since more employees are demanding to work from home. As your councillor, I would emphasize knowledge-based businesses that require skilled labour such as professional, scientific and technical services which are already the second highest employers in the small to medium sized businesses category. In fact, being located in King would be a great way for businesses to attract workers which is a particular challenge for many employers at the moment. Employers would have a large pool of labour to draw from with over one million people in York Region alone while employees would have a better quality of life with King's abundant natural spaces. To attract these businesses, I would work with King's Economic Development officer to create a marketing package to be distributed to the appropriate business associations that promotes the value of having a business in King. Schneider said boosting employment is essential in King, stressing agri-food businesses need our support. Local farmers need closer access to processing facilities and there's no reason these can't be located in King. He's a big supporter of keeping money here in King. Raymond said a logical first step would be to keep our current businesses close to home. As a business owner myself, I sadly found it incredibly limiting when looking for local office space and had to rent elsewhere. I would like to focus on increasing the availability of commercial properties and believe there are some ideal locations within the Township to house some additional commercial and industrial units. Schomberg around the Trisan Centre seems to be a great first step. Simply put, more options for local business owners to keep it local. Pham noted any town without employment growth will die. Let the market, the demand, and the supply of goods and services, not the government, do the business. He would like to see a local agri-business hub in King, leveraging our great and knowledgeable farmers, short transportation to the GTA market, good soil, etc. We need to work with universities and research organizations, he said, to bring our fresh, organic product to the highest standard, and to make King's agriculture products a staple in the market. He'd also like to see more local festivals, sports, and tourism businesses. Finally, allowing more residential construction, creating more agriculture and senior care job opportunities, and creating commercial business opportunities are all necessary. Lloyd said King is well suited to attracting jobs. We need a variety and sufficient supply of employment lands. He wants to get the word out that King is a business-friendly environment. He sees

greater collaboration with the Chamber and various village associations as key to helping the community grow. He supports incentives such as offering concessions or extended amortization periods for development charges to attract employers who want to build here. I would also like to investigate a Township-sponsored business incubator that would attract smaller businesses and entrepreneurs. Lovisotto said we need to encourage businesses to open in King Township. Farming has always been a great part of the fabric of King Township but as farming dies off in our town centres, businesses need to be encouraged to replace those farms that are gone. Personally, any kind of business in King Township, whether industrial or commercial does not matter. Anything that encourages people to come to King Township, spend their money, and broaden our tax base is good enough for me. Eveson said she spoke with business owners within Ward 4. One of the major concerns she heard is increases in taxes. One of the opportunities to help take the pressure off residents of rising costs is by having more businesses within King Township, so I believe there is a benefit to encouraging future employment growth. Due to the character of Ward 4 and the business spaces that are already available, we have a lot of opportunities for smaller business owners, and entrepreneurs. A way to help attract these types of businesses could be by offering information sessions on owning your own business or being an entrepreneur. I know a few businesses that have failed due to not understanding the business side of owning a business. Budgeting, overhead expenses, and such. It would be an opportunity to help shape an idea into a reality. If we were able to provide an opportunity to support these aspiring individuals to help them be successful and learn before they start everything that is involved in owning a business, I believe it would help with their success of it. Asselstine said local youth are worried about jobs and it's hard to find meaningful employment. But we have an amazing opportunity to promote the development of the tourist industry with a focus on passive recreation, eco-tourism, agri-tourism, and associated services and public transportation. We also need to protect our designated employment lands from conversion to residential lands and allow commercial, light industrial and office uses to remain close to our communities providing local jobs. We can attract employment by ensuring that employment lands are fully serviced; improving cellular and internet access and putting more resources into the Township's Economic Development office to attract new business and to support the existing business community through events, workshops, grants, networking, etc. Schaefer said her platform has 3 strategies. One of them is leverage our growth to enhance the community. Growth will happen. The job for council is to facilitate the employment growth so that it does more than simply increase property tax revenue. We need new businesses to install themselves where the zoning permissions exist. This is important as seeking to start a business where the permission is not in place costs time and money. Current council has improved the ability for someone to identify where to start a business. In Ward 5 there are employment lands available, and the core area zone has been expanded north of King Road on west side of Keele. We now have a countryside zoning bylaw which enables new employment opportunities as there are revisions to home industries, on-farm diversified uses, etc. Di Mascolo said encouraging local business and employment growth promotes buying local and also reduces the carbon footprint of commuting. We must also look at other means and opportunities to grow the local economy, not solely relying on residential tax dollars to fund public amenities and services, he stressed. King Township must look at attracting new local business growth, such as commercial retail and light industrial, which would allow our own residents opportunities to work closer to home while shifting the tax revenue burden away from residential property taxes and, in turn, keeping future property tax increases as low as possible. He's also a proponent of utilizing lands closer to the 400 to attract new business and these alternate sources of tax revenue.

What, if anything, do you think the Township of King could be doing to better serve and support our existing business community?

Pham would like to see the red tape cut locally, to make the rules more transparent. He's also a fan of reducing property taxes for commercial zones. I want to cut the red tape and make the process simple and transparent for all of us, but to do it I need the support of you, the local people, he said. He said government is out of touch with its citizens, and relatively small issues should be solved right away. Schneider said council needs those who have solid agricultural knowledge to support local farmers and the agriculture sector. His history and work on various boards and committees gives him the expertise needed in this regard. As well, he's prepared to advocate at upper levels of government to remove any roadblocks. Raymond said we need to help the business owners who live in King by expanding the availability of commercial and retail space. This in turn would enable growth and new ventures within our business communities and have positive effects on our residents directly, as well as our greater economy. He's interested in exploring ways to further elevate the Chamber's involvement in our local business community. Sometimes as business owner we get stuck in a rut or are just busy dealing with the day to day that we forget how important it is to surround ourselves with new, creative, like-minded people. Anstey said promoting eco-tourism would be the very best way to support many of our existing businesses. King offers a variety of agri-tourism destinations which are ideal for attracting the millions of people that are just a short drive from King. Di Mascolo said improvements need to be made with parking along Keele Street. The municipality should create

awareness and encourage use of available government grants that landlords can utilize to make building improvements. He'd like to see the core aesthetics improved and he wants to see a return of events and festivals in the village. Schaefer noted the Community Improvement Plan (CIP) was refreshed in 2021 and helps fund things like new signage, facades, expansion/renovations. The Community Tourism Plan was endorsed last year and we need to execute it. A tourism plan does not just benefit a business in tourism; exposure to King in any way is a potential new customer in any business. Cescolini said the Township has to leverage meeting room space to create things like career development programs and preparing the local workforce for jobs. Seretis said the Township needs to be promoting and advertising to reach a larger clientele than they normally would be able to reach. This will bring in tourism dollars and creates a sense of community as families across King Township gather for fun and festivities. Specifically in Ward 1, the business community would be better served with ample and clearly allocated parking. As new residential developments are being constructed on Keele St and King Road, this will undoubtedly cause traffic congestion and scarcity of parking. If the roads cannot accommodate the traffic and there is nowhere to park, small businesses will face tougher challenges in attracting customers. We do not want to create a situation where commuters avoid stopping in entire areas because of traffic mismanagement. It is important that the township have a robust plan for traffic management and not only focus on the development fees. Eveson said events such as the Sidewalk Sales, Taste of Main, and other similar programs really help to attract potential customers to Schomberg. An increase in these types of events is beneficial to continue to support awareness. Asselstine stressed the Township needs to deal with the specific needs of businesses in a positive and efficient manner by providing more resources to the Economic Development Office and using that office as the gateway for questions, concerns, support and activities. She said we could consider a Business Improvement Area, or other networking group. We could also benefit from workshops in marketing, building a business, computer skills, etc. The Township needs to provide more and effective messaging directly to the businesses about what is happening in King Township. Lovisotto noted King Township lacks industry, but we do have many small businesses that add to the fabric of our communities. Local shops such as the Grackle Coffee shop, or the Schomberg Pub, are as much a part of the community as the community itself. They act as meeting places just as much as places of business. I want to see policies that are aimed to make business easier for them. Whether it's lower taxes or some kind of grant, I want to see these businesses stick around for many years to come. Lloyd pointed out better streetscaping is needed to improve the village aesthetics. As a councillor he would act as a liaison with local businesses.