

Aurora Votes 2018: Gaertner wants Aurora to 'stick to the plan'?



By Brock Weir

Wendy Gaertner has seen issues come, issues go, and issues addressed during her four terms on Aurora Council, but one perennial topic that has been top of mind during each of those terms has been the revitalization of Aurora's Downtown Core.

It's an issue that is going to be top of mind once again should Aurorans send her back to the Council table for a fifth time this fall, and to address revitalization, Ms. Gaertner says 'we need to stick to the plan.'

'We have been talking about the revitalization of Yonge Street for so long, and I remember in my first election speech talking about it,' says Ms. Gaertner, the longest serving incumbent on Council. 'We actually have an exciting and comprehensive plan in place, the Promenade Plan, of how we can do this and it envisions protecting our historical downtown core, intensification through condos and apartments to provide that critical foot traffic.'

'So far, since 2011, we have one low-rise residential building and, in the last two years, we have allowed two stacked townhouse developments without any commercial on the ground floor, and a retirement home. They are contrary to the great planning that was done to revitalize Yonge Street. We need to stick to the Plan. Why has it taken us so long?'

Indeed, in seeking a fifth term, Ms. Gaertner says there is still much to be done.

'I am seeking a Council seat again because there is important unfinished business that will determine how our community develops,' she says. 'One of these is Library Square and the new Cultural building. Before Council makes a final decision, we must have business and operations plans to know how much this will cost the taxpayers to run. Staffing and maintenance will be expensive. The community must be involved in the final decision. We must not rush this last important phase. We need to be eyes wide open. Certainly we have not rushed the process to date, but the financial piece is very important and needs a lot of scrutiny and public input.'

Another important issue Ms. Gaertner says she would like to see through is efforts to protect Aurora's 'mature neighbourhoods from developments that will hurt the residents' quality of life.' She cites the hundreds of residents who filled Council chambers over recent months on the protection of 'Stable neighbourhoods' asking for this protection.

'Overly large homes,' she says, are negatively impacting residents' privacy, their light and air circulation, as well as the 'look, feel and enjoyment' of their neighbourhoods.

'I believe there is misunderstanding about changing the permissions in the zoning bylaws,' says Ms. Gaertner. 'Large homes will continue to be built. That is the way of the present and probably the future, but they must be in harmony. They must work well within the neighbourhoods [in which] they are locating.'

'Our Official Plan, which is our premiere tool to govern how future development will take place, is very protective of stable neighbourhoods. It says that we must ensure that our stable neighbourhoods are protected from the negative impact and potential of incompatible development. Further, people don't understand that the Planning Act says that an Official Plan, when we have an update to an Official Plan, that Council must go through all the zoning bylaws to see if they are in accordance with the Official Plan. We didn't do that. We never looked at stable neighbourhoods, and I don't know why. Other municipalities have been looking at that problem for a long time and we must figure this out.'

Aurora, she says, also needs to ensure that those individuals living with accessibility needs are 'respectfully accommodated' and that our aging population is able to live well and with dignity.

A key component of that in the next term of Council will be addressing parking issues in Library Square.

Parking at the planned addition to the Church Street School shouldn't be as much of a problem because parking will be at the side of the building, but for the Square itself, there is a slope in topography that could be a problem, she says.

'It is going to be a real challenge for seniors,' she says, of older Aurorans negotiating the slope down to the Square, as well as the Library itself. 'We haven't figured it out and we must not ignore those needs.'

There is also a need for more recreation opportunities for the growing community, with the challenge being to find suitable land on which to build.

'We missed an important opportunity in 2011 to obtain land in the northeast quadrant of Aurora,' she says. 'Hopefully we will be able to work with the province on this, although there might be some unpopular trade-offs. We need a new recreation facility, but the recreation reserve is in a negative position. I think we're going to have to think about public-private partnerships, or perhaps residential on top of a rec centre. We're going to have to look at something that will be able to make it viable. Everything costs money. Where are we going to get it from?'

This year, unlike in her previous four elections, Ms. Gaertner will be vying for one of six Council seats rather than the traditional eight. Removing two Council seats for the 2018-2022 term was something she opposed because she did not believe there was enough public input on the matter.

Many members of the outgoing Council said reducing its size was the first step towards a ward system, whereby one Councillor would be elected by a specific neighbourhood in Town.

This is a step Ms. Gaertner also remains opposed to because she says she likes the idea of everyone in Aurora being able to come to any Councillor with whatever is on their mind.

'Sometimes the ward Councillor and some of the residents don't see eye to eye, so it gives everyone an opportunity to speak to anyone who will listen to them. With seven people on Council, the majority is four. That means four people can be making the decisions for the entire community. That, to me, doesn't seem like enough,' she says, noting she would like to start a conversation in the new term, should she be re-elected, on whether or not serving on Council should be considered a full-time job. 'It's such a responsible job and it is so much work.'

'[Although I have been on Council since 2003], I am still learning and I seem to get more energy with each passing year because I have a sincere desire to do what is right for the community and the residents. They need us to do what is right for them and I find that very invigorating.'