

Epidemiologist to challenge Health Minister in Newmarket-Aurora race



They have been fighting the pandemic in very different ways over the course of the last two years, but it will be a fight of a different kind in Newmarket-Aurora this June as Ontarians head to the polls.

As the local ballot begins to firm up, York Region Public Health epidemiologist Denis Heng will face off against Progressive Conservative incumbent Christine Elliott as the candidate for the Ontario NDP. Also confirmed for the Newmarket-Aurora ballot is neuropsychologist Dr. Sylvain Roy for the Ontario Liberals.

Heng's nomination was confirmed last week and he is taking an unpaid leave of absence from York Region Public Health for the duration of the campaign.

'I never dreamed at all I would be a political candidate,' says Heng. 'I have been voting ever since I was 18 and I definitely believe in my responsibilities as a citizen to vote and participate in democracy, but I never thought of myself as a politician. I have always seen the appeal of NDP values and the ideas of looking and trying to help others in my community, but it really struck home with me with COVID.'

'As a public health professional, that is where I have been trying to make the most impact in my career. Seeing how the events and COVID measures unfolded over the past two months, I know my mental state has taken a beating like everyone else's and looking at the divide that continued to grow in different communities I feel there is more that I can be doing.'

Being approached by the local party, he said, gave him some time for self-reflection and throwing his hat into the ring to make a difference was the deciding factor.

Given his background in public health, running against the incumbent who also serves as Deputy Premier and Minister of Health, 'doesn't really make a difference?' in messaging, he says.

'I bring an expertise and that is part of the reason I felt more comfortable stepping in and stepping up for this election because I feel like COVID has been a very salient part of our everyday lives for the past two+ years; I know as an epidemiologist everyone now seems to know [what the job is] and I no longer have to tell people I am not a skin doctor, but I feel like I bring an important voice to the conversation, a scientific- and evidence-informed voice.'

'The thing I have really appreciated is although I have a science background and I am using that to look at the health and wellbeing of the community as a whole, as opposed to individuals like a medical doctor would, I understand the nuances of how science has to

interact with policy. When I am looking at some of the decisions that have been made, I think as an individual, based on my expertise, I might be a bit more cautious, I might be a bit more gradual in my approach. I know in the real world that science has to interact with policies, it has to interact with the social environment and how people feel, and I think an NDP government has a lot to offer with regards to trying to get us off the roller coaster of openings and closings and openings and closing.?

The dad of two who lives in the Aurora Grove community says he believes people should be ?judged by their actions and not just the promises that they make during election time? and a government's work shouldn't be done just ?within the last four to five months before an election.?

?I think the big things for Newmarket-Aurora and Ontarians as a whole, the first thing is to get off this rollercoaster,? he says. ?The thing is to get back into participating in society with regards to getting out of COVID. I think there have been a lot of people throwing out that phrase ?living with COVID' and on the surface I would definitely agree, but I think the devil is in the details. I think that society really has to have a conversation about the values of what does that actually mean? I think as part of my campaign and engaging with Newmarket-Aurora residents, that is one of the questions I will be asking. When I say we should be emerging stronger from COVID, I am thinking about that as a community and I feel Newmarket-Aurora is able to thrive after this huge curveball that has been thrown at us, both from a health standpoint, a mental health standpoint and wellbeing.

?I think the NDP's values and roles are really trying to get at an opportunity where our policies are able to promote equal opportunity. I think from my public health background, one of my biggest roles is to decrease the gap in health and wellbeing outcomes between residents and how can we make fair policy that will benefit the Newmarket and Aurora community so it can not only thrive for current residents but also future residents.?

In the coming weeks, The Auroran will go in-depth with all confirmed candidates as the election approaches.

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