

First mayoral debate comes down to dollars and cents



By Brock Weir

How Council has spent ? and will spend ? your tax dollars dominated the first debate of the 2018 Municipal Election.

It was standing room only at Town Hall on Sunday afternoon as more than 200 residents came out to the first of three all-candidates' meetings, this one hosted by the Aurora Public Library.

Billed as a ?discussion?, the event attracted all four mayoral and sixteen Councillor candidates and all three candidates vying to be the next Public School Board trustee for Aurora and King.

Each candidate had the chance to make opening remarks while the four mayoral candidates also fielded questions submitted by those in attendance.

Among the most common threads were those related to fiscal responsibility and oversight on some of the larger ticket items completed by the current Council, such as Aurora's Joint Operations Centre (JOC), as well as those set in motion by the current crop of lawmakers, including renovations to the historic Aurora Armoury and turning the Hallmark lands into a hub for baseball.

?Fiscal accountability is the key to good governance,? said one attendee in their question. ?How will you ensure that taxpayer money is well-spent and capital projects will come in on time and on budget??

First to tackle this question was John Abel, who said he defined ?fiscal responsibility? as ?doing one's due diligence, and that means you are informed and you delve into the issue and get a greater understanding.?

?That means you're going to understand the financial implications and you're always going to have alternatives at hand so you can weigh your options on what is the best way to proceed,? said Mr. Abel, before taking aim at the specifics. ?We have many examples?of how not to proceed and that is just to come with an incomplete report and hastily rush forward, which is what we did with the Armoury [and] the addition to the Cultural Centre, and again with the Hallmark lands. We need to weigh it carefully and consider what the options are and engage our community and make the best decision. That is the way we will do fiscal responsibility.?

Tom Mrakas was the next candidate to sink his teeth into this issue.

?When it comes to projects within our Town, the first thing, and foremost [is] we need to have a project manager on staff,? he said. ?We did develop a task force for our JOC project, which comprised of two of the members sitting here and, as the audit report did state: it lacked leadership. I think we need to have that leadership in place to make sure and ensure that the projects we're moving forward with ? Library Square, for instance, the Armoury ? have that project manager in place that has the expertise.

?All of us sitting around the table have knowledge, we do our due diligence, we go through everything but, at the end of the day, we need subject matter experts to be there to ensure we build these projects on time and on budget.?

In his answer, Chris Ballard focused squarely on the development of the JOC, which was approved during his time on the 2010-2014 Council term.

?What started out as a seven, eight, nine million dollar project, and I supported it in those days on Council, I stopped supporting it when it hit about \$14 million. I understand it is \$30 million - \$35 million. One of the last motions I put on the Council table that was

approved was two members of Council sit on the management committee together with senior staff so they could get the day by day, week by week information about how the project was rolling out. What were the little problems before they became big problems? and their job was to communicate with Council. That clearly didn't happen.

If you look at where the price tag is today, that type of fiscal management, that type of fiscal control, fiscal responsibility has been sorely lacking in these past few years, whether it be the Joint Operations Centre, whether it be the Armoury, or other projects as well. We need Council to get back in control and better understand how your tax dollars are being spent.

Next up was Geoff Dawe, who zeroed in on Mr. Ballard's record as a cabinet minister in the recently ousted Liberal Provincial Government. Mr. Dawe said it was rich for a member of government who drove up Provincial debt to tens of thousands per person to speak about fiscal accountability.

The first thing we need in fiscal accountability and fiscal responsibility is facts, not fantasy. The audit report, which is on the [Town website] and it explains a lot, said Mr. Dawe. I actually brought forward the motion to have it independently audited. Our Town is in great fiscal shape. Anybody who has actually bothered to look at the [report] which is on our Town Website, our 10-year capital plan, our audited financial returns, we have the Financial Advisory Committee that Councillor Thompson brought forward, and I thank him for doing that, open to the public, free to come in. We have people who come regularly to those meetings. Ask them what our fiscal status is in this Town. We are in great shape. We have fiscal accountability, we have fiscal responsibility. I do not believe in fantasy.

SUPPORT OF ARMOURY, HALLMARK DEALS

A question just a few minutes later, however, pressed the candidates to dig deeper on their positions regarding the deal to lease the Armoury to Niagara College for a campus of their Canadian Food & Wine Institute, a decision made in closed session and later fleshed out via a press release, as well as their positions on the Hallmark lands.

In response, Mr. Ballard said the process around the Armoury deal was something that boggles the mind but was vague on his overall support of the project. It might be a good decision, he said, but there was an absence of fulsome public input and public planning on the matter.

Like most residents of this town, we heard about it when it was announced and a done deal with the Town, he said. That type of planning, that type of lack of planning, has to stop. We have to be engaged. We have to be engaged as citizens, not just at election time. We have to be engaged as citizens throughout the four-year time, constantly, regularly and with purpose.

It is one of the themes of my campaign about [bringing] proactive leadership to the Council table so that these types of decisions can be heard, he said. With regards to the Hallmark lands, I am concerned about the loss of tax revenues through the repurposing of that property, but as one of the Council candidates pointed out, we sold a number of potential recreational properties to put industrial lands on it and never really figured out how to replace that property. Going forward, we need to do a better integrated plan to make sure we have the facilities we need and everybody in this room knows what's happening, what's going on, who we're talking to, and we can hear you and make sure that your input is consulted.

Mr. Dawe agreed that engagement is always a good thing and defended Council's decision on the Hallmark lands.

It was a Council decision in 2015 to purchase those lands for recreational purposes, he said, and that was an issue up before Council on a number of occasions. But, Mr. Dawe also contended that saying the Armoury deal was done behind closed doors was ludicrous.

There was a long process, it was a public process, we had consultations, he said. It is disingenuous at the least to suggest that we're doing this in behind closed doors. It is unbelievable that people would try and make something that is going to do so much to Town Park, that is going to do so much to revitalize the area of downtown, to restore a national historic site [sic] to its former glory, I fail to see how that is a bad thing.

The Armoury deal has been a key platform issue of Mr. Abel's since he launched his bid and he reiterated many of these points in his response to the question. Council, he said, purchased the Armoury with the intent of making it a cultural hub and instead offering it up for a culinary school was forfeiting community space we so desperately needed.

We don't need a training facility to bring activity to our Armoury, he said. We are the community. We will use that for our uses and not give it away, but it is the financial implications of giving that space away that is deafening because then we have to replace that and we're putting an addition to the Cultural Centre for \$26 million.

Understanding that you have alternatives, we could have easily gone and taken a culinary school to the Baldwin's building, which is still empty, which was available for lease, and they could have gone in there and had their training centre there and shared the great

community cultural hub that we would have at the armoury. No alternatives and no financial implications were understood and it was all done in closed session, of course.?

As for the Armoury, Mr. Abel said he's opposed to employment lands being used for recreational rather than employment purposes. Instead, he said the lands should be sold and the proceeds used to transform Machell Park into a space with two new senior baseball diamonds and the balance used to complete renovations on the Armoury and Library Square.

?I think [the Hallmark lands] was a great pickup from this Council to put it as recreational property and, actually Councillor Abel, you voted in favour of that,? contended Councillor Mrakas. ?Now you want to change your mind, but that's okay. The only decision I would have preferred to see was that the lands would have been one baseball, one multipurpose, as everyone knows, but Council did make a decision for two baseball diamonds, so I moved forward with that, and I think the community is better because we have more recreational space for our residents to be able to afford them opportunities to participate in more sporting events.

?As far as the Armoury, I think that when you hear someone attacking the process it is because they don't have anything else to say about it. The Armoury is a good deal. It is a great deal for this Town, we have a world class post-secondary institute coming to our Town. People would kill and pay anything to have this type of an institute come to their town and we have them coming here to our downtown core.

?Yes, I have talked to business owners that believe that this is a great opportunity as well for them moving forward. Restaurants are looking forward to this. They are looking at utilizing Niagara College and their students who are coming in and possibly staying and opening new restaurants in Town. This is a great opportunity for the Town and I believe the whole Town is excited and should be excited about this. I am in favour of both and finishing both as your mayor.?