

Re-elected Deputy Mayor optimistic over next four years ahead of inauguration



By Brock Weir

As Aurora's Deputy Mayor, Councillor John Abel has become an increasingly visible presence in the community, but it is a title that is more of a convention than a formal role.

Over the next four years, Councillor Abel will continue to define the role in his own way after handily being re-elected to the Council table last month.

Traditionally, the title and role of Deputy Mayor has gone to the top vote getter in the Council race, a feat Councillor Abel sewed up for the second election in a row. As the name suggests, the duties of a Deputy Mayor boil down to representing the Mayor at events he or she is unable to attend. But, while deputizing is the name of the game, the role is what the holder makes of it.

"While you're basically there to fulfil the obligations that the Mayor can't in his busy schedule, I think you provide a little bit of leadership in bringing ideas forward," he explains. "I don't want to say checks and balances, but you're not there just to agree with the Mayor. Your role is to provide a balance and create options for Council as opposed to just saying what the Mayor wants to put forward."

Now with four more years in the office to look forward to, Councillor Abel says it was an "honour and a privilege" to be re-elected last month. In his view, it is a reflection of the job Council did in the outgoing term and confidence in voters of the direction they are headed.

"We didn't land on the moon or anything, but we covered community business and planning, and brought all those things together and moved forward in a coordinated manner," says Councillor Abel. "We completed the Nokiidaa Trail, the Petch House, but all of those things were minor. We brought in the Leslie Street lands for servicing and we got Bulk Barn, which is huge. We put forward a strategic plan, we put in a bid for a university, so we are looking at ways to attract business and sustain our community."

"Going forward, I think we really need to think of creating a cluster economy, so we can eliminate commuting, which might alleviate some of the traffic. All of this will encourage a lifestyle where we can ride our bikes, go to work, and shop, and entertain ourselves in our community rather than leaving the community to do those things."

A key ingredient in this vision is making it more attractive for youth and younger residents to stay in the community. Focusing on this economic development will create those job opportunities, but while those job opportunities will be essential, so too will be a focus on affordable housing.

“We have to work with all levels of government, starting with the Region and the Province, and the Federals because they are all going to have to be involved in this,” says Councillor Abel. “We have to have communication with all three levels of government. I think it is imperative to getting moving. We also need to work with organizations and businesses within the Town.”

Little, however, can happen without a solid budget in place, and that remains priority number one for Councillor Abel once the new Council is sworn in on Tuesday, December 2 at Town Hall. Briefings and tours of municipal facilities are ongoing to get the three new faces on Council up to speed on the issues facing the Town, and for other Councillors looking for a bit of a refresher, and then it is down to business.

Outside of the budget process itself, Councillor Abel says he would like to revisit one issue that was particularly divisive in the outgoing terms of Council, and that is a list of options on what can be done about three historic Yonge Street properties with uncertain futures. The swath of land on the west side of Yonge Street just north of Irwin Avenue is bookended by Horton Place in the south, a home which is currently on the real estate market, and by Hillary House National Historic Site in the north.

A proposal came forward in the outgoing term to transform this into a multi-million dollar heritage facility, dubbed Hillary-McIntyre Park, an idea which fizzled at Town Hall after reports cast doubt on the project's viability.

“I know we did consultation on a park, but I am not sure a park [is the right way forward],” says Councillor Abel. “I would like to look back on those properties again because they are right downtown and I think they are a valuable asset. I am hoping better than a park we can look at a combination or brand new ideas.”

Looking ahead, Councillor Abel says he is optimistic that the incoming Council will be a productive one. “Division” on the table, he says, has been “eliminated” and the new term has an opportunity to show “tremendous growth” and set a “benchmark” for the community.