

VOTE 2014: Serving the community is about more than business experience, says Roy Cohen



By Brock Weir

As an active soccer coach with the Aurora Youth Soccer Club, Roy Cohen has had little time to let grass grow under his feet but, in his view, the same cannot be said for Aurora Council in helping to meet the needs of Aurora's budding athletes.

Mr. Cohen was the 28th candidate of 28 to throw his hat into the political ring this year for a shot at Aurora Council. It was a good opportunity to continue work he has already started, he said, particularly when it comes to addressing shortfalls on local sports fields.

“In 48 months, this Council and Mayor failed miserably at achieving those initiatives,” says Mr. Cohen on achieving provincial guidelines for open spaces. “We are still 106 hectares behind the Provincial guideline. When I look at the costs that come in on [municipal projects] and they are over-budgeted, in the private sector you lose your job. There is no second chance.

“I am sure once I get in there and get my feet wet I will be able to identify other areas that need assistance and maybe need some guidance. I don't have all the answers, but I have a team that does and I will research it and make sure I have comparables with other municipalities and will back up my thoughts. It won't just be off the cuff. That is not the way I operate.”

By his “team”, Mr. Cohen means a group of “advisors, close knit circles, and a huge brain trust” collected from his over 30 years of work for a land acquisition and commercial real estate company. This work, he says, has given him experience in looking at housing and development issues around the table.

“I deal with different scenarios on a daily basis in my own business, so a lot of the challenges or obstacles [at Council] are very parallel. I can find great solutions. I am a person you can count on, especially with our youth in the community. I will be able to roll up my sleeves and start running instead of learning.

“People say they have been here for six months and they want to give back. I think it is too important for our community to have candidates running that are really inexperienced and have no business running. I think they just need to put in some community service, time, and understand our community better than just cozying up to an affiliation and saying they are running. That is great, but let's see your pedigree.”

Looking ahead to the challenges that will face the new Council over the next four years, among Mr. Cohen's chief concerns is the

fact Aurora is essentially landlocked as far as growth is concerned. Serious consideration needs to be given to annexation for growth, or the 'reconfiguration' of lands that 'aren't included in urban boundaries.'

Intensification along Yonge Street is also a concern, and that will require a coordinated effort with the Region of York to make it a reality. While Mr. Cohen says he needs to do further research on a 'real' solution to the issue of the vacant land on Mavrinnac Boulevard residents are fighting to secure as park space, he says an 'equitable' solution should be in the offing.

Although the final price tag on what that land might cost is still an unknown as the Town does battle with Minto Developments in court over its future, Mr. Cohen says his top priority is to 'hold down property taxes and work within Aurora's own budget.

'I think our ratepayers deserve it,' he says. 'I look at this opportunity not so much as sitting on Council, but assisting and helping with my expertise, number crunching and working within a budget and allocating dollars where they are necessary. I look at every single citizen of Aurora and I think of them as a shareholder. I don't look at them as just a ratepayer. Our job is to make sure we're eliminating unnecessary costs and that we make absolutely prudent decisions with every dollar that is spent.

'It sounds like lip service, but it isn't, because I do that on a daily basis. We're constantly shaving points and at the end of the year it is hundreds of thousands of dollars.'

In the final days of this campaign, Mr. Cohen counts gaining community support as the most rewarding aspect of it so far, but the biggest challenge is getting people out to vote ' a challenge faced by all candidates, he says.

'It is paramount you understand your community. Living here for 20 years and saying you're a business owner doesn't really cut it. Where have you reached out? What associations have you volunteered at to understand more, understand more of what the needs are and just to reach out, just to help out with the Salvation Army, standing outside at Christmas ? I would like to see more of that. At the Aurora Youth Soccer Club we run with close to 1,000 volunteers and we still don't have enough.'