

We need to change how we think to get beyond the next four years: Mayor



By Brock Weir

When Geoff Dawe was first elected Mayor in 2010, he said at the time he wanted the hallmark of his term to be bringing civility and decorum back to Town Hall.

It is a hallmark he hopes to continue as he prepares to enter his second term next month.

But, more than that, the early days of this Council term will also be focused on laying a strong foundation for the future, he says.

‘Our official plan is up for review and our Parks and Recreation Master Plan is up for review,’ he says. ‘Those projects take a long time and require a lot of input, there are a lot of moving pieces to it and areas that we can move forward on.’

Mayor Dawe has spent the last few days following the October 27 Municipal Election getting down to business once again after a hard-fought campaign, but one which ultimately returned him to the top job with a solid mandate.

Looking back over election night, he says there were more nerves this time around. As the incumbent, he knew better this time what to expect and how high the stakes were. You know you can lose, he says, but as a first-timer that feeling is a relative unknown. Adding to the pressure is as an incumbent you have a record you have to defend and a loss could be a rejection of that.

‘It is easier to be on the attack than it is to be on the defensive, quite frankly,’ he says. ‘That sound bite takes maybe 10 seconds to deliver on what the issue is, and the facts behind the sound bite begin to put something straight can be up to 10 minutes. It is much easier to get the sound bite out than to get the explanation of what went on and whether or not it is even right.’

One such issue that cropped up over this campaign was the cost of Aurora's Joint Operations Centre, which was approved by Council this past summer. This was compounded by a flyer which went around Town in the final days of the campaign with inflated numbers that Mayor Dawe wanted to refute.

‘There were a couple of times when people talked me off the ledge in terms of me over-responding to something, so I am most proud of the people who worked with me and managed to do that,’ he says of that flyer. ‘In hindsight [the flyer] was kind of innocuous, but when it comes out and it is four or five days before the end of the election and you're stressed out beyond belief already, it is just enough to push you over the edge. You do need sane people on your team who are going to say, ‘It is not an issue, don't worry about it!’’

Moving forward, however, Mayor Dawe says communication with the public is something which needs to be stepped up at Town Hall in the next little while. Although he says he believes they have done a better job in the past term of getting things out there and being more proactive in communications, there is always room for improvement.

‘We need to be far more diligent in making sure those stories get out as we are going along,’ he says. We really need to work on that because you can take a lot of that drama away.’

One of the more dramatic moments of the 2014 campaign took place at the final debate of the season, hosted by Sport Aurora. It is there that Mayor Dawe faced a question from the audience regarding transparency over the annual Mayor's Charity Golf Classic, as well as claims from mayoral challenger John Gallo that he had an ‘anonymous email’ sent to him claiming Town Staff were ‘forced’ to take vacation days to take part in the tourney. At the debate, Dawe countered that such claims were ‘bullshit’.

‘That whole thing just threw me for a loop,’ he says, chalking that up as his biggest surprise of the campaign, before adding with a laugh, ‘I think I handled it perfectly, actually! I don't tend to be an in-your-face kind of person. That is just not who I am. After I had my little hissy-fit, my little outburst, a lot of people said it was about time I did something like that. I am just not an out-there-in-your-face kind of guy. It is not my personality.’

Whether or not he brings that newfound brand of in-your-face into his second term is an idea on which he pours cold water, but says he plans to move forward with an idea he touted during the campaign to transform the section of Yonge Street bisecting Aurora's Historic Downtown Core into one lane of traffic each way with the balance set aside for on-street parking.

‘It is entirely within our purview and it just affects that particular part,’ he says. ‘I think that is something we can probably move ahead with a lot more quickly. We also need to come to a decision on what we are going to do with Library Square. There has been lots of talk and no action. I think this term we also need to come up with what we are going to do with [funds in Aurora's \$34 million Hydro Reserve account]. We are losing value on that money.’

‘I had commented during the debate we probably had one more [sports and recreation] complex project left in us for what we need in terms of our long-term growth and I think that would be of good use. The Hydro money came from selling a significant Town asset and I think it has to go back to a significant Town asset, not fixing roads or putting new water pipes in.’

During the next four years, as Aurora's 2C development nears completion, the Town will be inching closer and closer towards build-out and that represents a particular challenge for the year ahead, Mayor Dawe adds.

‘The biggest challenge for us is to realise that beyond that time period we are moving from a growth community to a sustainable community, so we need to change how we think.’