

Dufferin County council prospects make their pitches to voters at all-candidate forum

Written By JAMES MATTHEWS

Dufferin County candidates had the opportunity to lay out some of their election platform planks during the Dufferin Board of Trade's online all-candidate forum.

Mayoral and deputy mayoral candidates in the Oct. 26 municipal elections made their pitches for votes Sept. 25. The mayor and deputy mayors represent their municipalities on the upper tier council.

"A strong local economy starts with supporting the businesses that call Grand Valley and Dufferin County home," said Paul Latam, a mayoral candidate in Grand Valley.

A local business owner, he said he breathes agriculture and grew up on 50 acres of land that grew produce.

"When the last crop of shingles on farmland goes on, it means that we can no longer produce the food that we need. We have some of the best farmland in Ontario and we need to work to preserve it."

Steve Soloman, Grand Valley's incumbent mayor, said he has served the community with honesty and integrity.

"I'm the one in the room that can hold the culture of council and, as we all know, culture eats strategy for breakfast," he said. "My understanding is great about this town."

Philip Rentsch, the incumbent deputy mayor in Grand Valley, said the role means being a voice at the county council level.

Dufferin County will be faced with a stark choice over the next council term, he said.

"It's probably the main reason why I want to stick with it," Rentsch said. "We have tried to be all things to all people but we haven't had the courage or the guts to pay for it. And I think that's going to be the issue."

If the upper tier wants to do everything through the county itself and freeze out private enterprise from assuming some of the responsibilities and services, then taxes at the county level need to increase, he said.

His choice would be to do less as a government and tap for-profit and non-profit entities to provide some services.

"Specifically in the case of economic development," Rentsch said. "We need to stop doing what we're doing. Stop pretending that we can attract multinational businesses."

He said the county should work more closely with the board of trade to encourage and help grow current local businesses.

Ruth Plowright served as a councillor in Melancthon over the last term. This time around, she asks voters to promote her to the mayor's seat over incumbent Mayor Darren White.

One of her strengths professionally and while in business has been in team-building, she said. She's about to retire, and that would set her up to thrive as mayor.

"My extensive business background sets me up well to understand budgets and how to look for savings," Plowright said.

White said he's dedicated more than 17 years to the community with strong leadership, practical experience, and real results. In that time, he was the county's warden five times.

He said he's championed high-speed internet, affordable housing, economic development initiatives, senior's care, and environmental protection.

?I have consistently worked on boards and committees that keep our communities running,? White said.

In Mono, John Creelman, the incumbent mayor, said the town was studied about 30 years ago by a panel of municipal experts from a number of countries, and they liked what they saw.

?The recommendation to the community at the time (was) preserve the best of what you have because you will never get it back,? he said.

Creelman said Mono's best is in its rural character, its unsurpassed natural environment, the lowest tax rate in Dufferin County, no debt, and approachable and respected elected officials.

He said he will work to maintain the town's best attributes, ensure residents' voices are heard, and that the municipality is well run.

?Every resident expects well-delivered and affordable municipal services,? he said.

Just about half of residents' tax dollars go to county services, he said.

?Your mayor needs to know the workings of Dufferin County and how to advocate for our share of services, especially badly needed county road maintenance and safety improvements,? Creelman said.

And he's the mayor to do that.

Melinda Davie is a Mono councillor in the running for the mayor's job. There are important decisions ahead for Mono, she said, and included roads and infrastructure among the priorities that need more than short-term fixes and deferrals.

?We need to think strategically about upkeep, investment, and how to ensure that what we have built, will build, and maintain today serves our community well into the future,? she said.

Mono's mayor also has a place on Dufferin County council where the responsibility extends beyond the municipal boundaries, she said.

?County council requires a broader perspective,? Davie said. ?An understanding of regional priorities and a commitment to make decisions that serve the best interests of the county as a whole.?

Meaningful progress means municipalities need to work together, and she brings willingness to listen, a collaborative approach, and a commitment to consider the larger picture.

Emerson Pendleton also has legs in the three-horse race for Mono's head of council. He said he aims to represent all residents and not just certain population segments.

?I think everybody should be dealt with equally,? he said.

He acknowledged that Davie and Creelman have steered a steady course for fiscal responsibility in their years on council. And they have been effective at maintaining Mono's rural character.

“But I want to jump in and really advocate for agriculture,” Pendleton said. “Agriculture is the biggest business in Dufferin and Mono.”

Laura Campbell has locked horns with incumbent Fred Nix in the deputy mayoral arena.

Campbell is a business owner, and that experience has afforded her an awareness of the region's economic challenges, she said. But there are also environmental challenges and those regarding development that need to be addressed.

“I want to take a greater responsibility for my home community,” she said. “And I want to bring my passion and my enthusiasm and my expertise in small business and in grassroots work and community building to Dufferin County.”

Mulmur Mayor Janet Horner has been acclaimed to her seat for the next term. But two current councillors are campaigning to be deputy mayor.

Patricia Clark has been on council over the last two terms. And her past professional roles have given her much experience with finances, human resources, planning, and marketing.

Those are skills that are valuable around the council table, she noted.

“I've always been active in the community,” Clark said.

As deputy mayor, she said she will continue to work to balance Mulmur's cherished rural lifestyle with its housing needs and appropriate commercial growth.

The other deputy mayor hopeful, Andrew Cunningham, didn't participate in the Dufferin Board of Trade's election forum.

Wade Mills is the incumbent candidate to be Shelburne's mayor. Residents' other choice for the role is Pratheeb (PK) Uthayakumar.

Mills said Dufferin County has shaped who he is today.

He served two terms as the county's warden, a time that taught him that progress comes through listening, finding common ground with all councillors and staff, and building consensus around shared priorities.

Economic development is one of those priorities of the upper tier, he said.

“I think we need to help our existing businesses thrive, help employers find the people that they need, and create more opportunities for our residents to work closer to home,” Mills said.

To that end, he believes a regional approach to economic development is the correct path.

Uthayakumar didn't participate in the board's online forum. Neither did deputy mayor candidates Len Guchardi, Mike Green, and Andrea Knight.