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Provincial election candidates square off at second debate held in Shelburne

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LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

Provincial election candidates for the Liberal, NDP and Green parties, and an independent candidate, attended a recent debate in Shelburne.

On February 20, the Dufferin Board of Trade held a debate at Grace Tipling Hall in Shelburne that was open to all candidates.

Sandy Brown, Green Party of Ontario candidate; Michael Dehn, Ontario Liberal Party candidate; George Nakitsas, Ontario NDP candidate; and Jeffrey Halsall, independent candidate attended the debate.

At the debate, the floor was open for residents to ask questions of the candidates. There were also questions from local organizations.

The Dufferin Federation of Agriculture asked what candidates would do to support farmers in Dufferin-Caledon if elected.

Nakitsas said the first thing he'd do is make sure the riding's farmland is preserved and spared from sprawling development and the proposed Highway 413. He also said he'd work to find new markets for Ontario agricultural products.

Halsall said more support should be given to events like farmers markets and that he'd focus on finding ways to encourage support of local farmers.

Dehn said tariff protections and strengthening the internal agriculture market would be key.

Brown said the Ontario Greens want to make an ?Ontario Food Belt? to permanently protect agricultural land from non-agricultural uses like urban sprawl and highways. He said as Ontario is only 5 per cent farmland, it should not be losing it at a rate of 300 acres per day.

The Greater Dufferin Home Builders Association asked candidates if they still believe development charges are the right tool to pay for growth, and if not, what their party proposes instead.

Nakitsas said the government should be involved in creating affordable housing to fill the gaps the development industry is leaving.

Dehn said he would like to work with the federal government to eliminate GST on any new home purchase that's a primary residence.

Brown said if development charges are removed, property taxes will go up so it's not a simple fix. He said the Conservatives have ignored Dufferin-Caledon for too long and that he'd do more to advocate for infrastructure-enabling funding.

The Orangeville Food Bank asked candidates how they would ensure that people who access the food bank have sustainable, long-term access to resources that support their well-being, ultimately helping them get to a place where they do not need to rely on non-profits.

Halsall said the solution lies in strengthening the economy so people have access to good jobs.

Dehn said he would look at a ?regional living wage? as he said the provincial minimum wage does not work for all communities. He

said the Liberals would double Ontario Disability Support Program funding and support the creation of tiny homes.

Brown said a housing-first approach is needed, and also said Ontario Disability Support Program funding should be increased. He said people should not have to choose between rent and groceries, and that the government needs to step up to help people succeed.

The Feb. 20 debate can be viewed in its entirety on the Dufferin Board of Trade's YouTube channel.