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The $32-million question

by NEIL ORFORD

Here's a challenge to all the candidates for Orangeville Town Council ? what is your plan for the $32 million received from the sale of the Orangeville Brampton Railway (OBRY)?

Perhaps more than any other issue in this municipal campaign, evaluating the position of each candidate on their plans for this money should tell us a lot about whom to vote for. Having sold the Orangeville Railway operations to Peel Region through a series of closed-door negotiations over the last two years, the current Town Council has left the money in the bank for the next council to spend. Should we support candidates who want to squander the money for one-time tax relief, or instead vote for those who have a responsible plan for the future?

In case you missed how Orangeville landed such a considerable windfall, the story begins in late 2019, when the ORDC (Orangeville Railway Development Corporation), which owned the OBRY, decided to abandon and dispose of the entirety of the 51 km railway operation and lands. For some time, the Town had argued that OBRY was a money-loser, despite providing an important industrial transportation link for five major local businesses. Many readers might also recall the highly successful Credit Valley Explorer or the ?Santa Train' that ran on the OBRY until 2018.

Nevertheless, the ORDC concluded a deal to sell the OBRY in July 2022, to Peel Region, which has made public its intention to remove all the tracks and develop the rail corridor into a multi-use trail while protecting the corridor from development.

The ORDC is a private corporation owned by the Town of Orangeville, established in 2000 to operate OBRY ? that means effectively, you own it. The Orangeville mayor acts as the chair of the ORDC board, and all the serving councillors are directors. With Orangeville as the sole shareholder, the ORDC board need not report to the citizens, provide annual financial accounting, or hold open public meetings. Consequently, not a single Orangeville citizen had a say in how the sale was conducted.

Now, in the midst a municipal election campaign, some candidates seem eager to talk about how to spend this money, but not about how they got the cheque in the first place. Certainly, incumbent-candidates owe the voters some answers, while voters and new candidates should seek full disclosure from the incumbents who oversaw the ORDC. Uncomfortable as some candidates may be to discuss the ORDC, an election campaign is the ideal time for citizens to challenge candidates with questions and debate issues.

In the coming days, as candidates release their platforms, how many of them will be frank about the ultra-secret affairs of the ORDC and equally, where the $32 million should be allocated now that the money is in the bank?

Some transparency would be helpful. The next Council should comprise councillors who are committed to prudent use of the OBRY money and strive from day one to undertake five important steps:

? Open the books on the ORDC for a full financial audit, so citizens understand whether they received good value in the sale of the OBRY;

? Dissolve the ORDC and issue a full report outlining the exact details of the OBRY sale, including any encumbrances on Orangeville;

? Earmark a portion of the $32 million to conduct a full transportation study in collaboration with Metrolinx and the province. Despite misinformation circulated by some members of the current council, Metrolinx has never been asked to conduct such a study, and has no valid evidence on the commuter transit needs for Orangeville or Dufferin County;

? Earmark a further portion of the windfall for completing the Orangeville-Shelburne Rail-Trail along the existing abandoned rail

corridor, incorporating it into the Dufferin County Tourism/ Healthy Living strategy for walkers, cyclists, snowmobilers, and nature enthusiasts;

? Deposit the balance of the $32 million in a dedicated reserve fund with an independent public board to oversee its appropriate investment and allocation. Typically, municipal reserve funds are subject to an external audit, the results of which are published in annual financial statements by the Town.

The ORDC sold the Orangeville Railway under a cloak of secrecy, and there remains too much about the deal that voters do not know. Because of that, some candidates might be tempted to spend the money like it is a ?lottery jackpot' as soon as they are elected.

Throughout North America, there is evidence showing how the loss of a local short line railway operation can sacrifice innovative opportunities for commuter rail transit, while simultaneously increasing truck volume on highways each day ? the environmental costs could be incalculable. It's likely that only our grandchildren will know for certain whether the sale of the OBRY has crippled the viability of future transit in Orangeville and Dufferin.

The current mayor and council had no vision and no plan for the Orangeville Railway. Other than to dispose of it to whoever could take it off the Town's books, the exiting Council sold our transit future for $32 million, and excluded you, the voters, from that decision.

The next Council must be more transparent and accountable. Beginning with a full series of public consultations throughout 2023-24, citizens could finally scrutinize how the OBRY was lost, and help shape policies that invest that $32 million wisely for the future.

The challenge is to vote for candidates committed to taking this step.