

Overflow crowd grills Waterloo mayoral candidates

BY TERRY PENDER, RECORD STAFF

WATERLOO — About 300 people packed the Albert McCormick Community Centre yesterday to pepper their four mayoral candidates with questions about hydro revenues, fluoridation of drinking water, merger talks with Kitchener, public transit, bicycle trails and leadership.

This city has the most number of mayoral candidates and the people attending Tuesday night's debate had lots of questions for Brenda Halloran, the incumbent mayor, Jan d'Ailly, a two-term member of city council, Franklin Ramsoomair, a former business professor and Dale Ross, a retired business executive.

"I am appalled by the blatant and scandalous squandering of our tax dollars," Franklin Ramsoomair, said in his opening statement.

The tax-rate stabilization fund had \$5.7 million four years ago, but now has \$100,000, a drop of 98 per cent, Ramsoomair said.

"Yet taxes have increased by 12 per cent in the past four years, twice the rate of inflation," Ramsoomair said.



Peter Lee, Record staff

The city has been plagued by financial mismanagement, Ramsoomair said.

Jan d'Ailly, said it is time for the city's mayor to lay out a vision for how people will live, work and play in Waterloo as it grows in size and reputation.

One of the main parts of d'Ailly's 17-point platform is what he calls "The Innovation Trail," a walking and cycling path that would loop through the city connecting Conestoga Mall, the Research and technology Park, the universities and the downtown.

Dale Ross, a retired executive, said he has 30 years in the private sector.

"I do not carry the baggage of a career politician," Ross said.

Ross said he would bring private-sector standards to some municipal operations. Later in the evening, Ross said, when it comes to pay increases Ross said he would put a halt to the practice of comparing wage levels with seven other cities and use private-sector benchmarks.

"I have a reputation for being pragmatic," Ross said.

The incumbent mayor, Brenda Halloran, knows too well that every municipal election in the past 10 years has sent a different person into the mayor's chair.

"We have a lot to be proud of in Waterloo, it is the best city in Canada," Halloran said. "Four years ago when I arrived there was a history of confrontation and closed doors."

Four years ago the city had the most debt in the province and now it is ranked seventh, Halloran said.

A new fire station and library branch were constructed on time and on budget during the past term of council, Halloran said.

In the past 10 years the City of Waterloo has taken millions of dollars out of its hydro utility, including \$14.2 million that was invested and will be used to pay off the \$32.8 million debt associated with the RIM Park financing scandal. The other cities in the region have also taken millions out of their utilities.

All of the candidates were asked if they agreed with taking funds out of the hydro utility.

Halloran said it is misleading to say the city has taken money out of the utility because those funds belonged to the citizens of Waterloo. The Waterloo North Hydro utility is seeking an 18.5 per cent increase in rates.

"There has not been an increase in our hydro rates in the past seven years," Halloran said.

Ross said the practice is unacceptable.

"It is nothing more than a back door tax increase," Ross said.



Peter Lee, Record staff

D'Ailly, who supported taking the \$14.2 million out of the utility for the RIM Park debt, said any surplus from the utility should be invested in the community to bury the lines underground, among other initiatives.

"I do believe it is a back door revenue source we should not be tapping into," d'Ailly said.

Rapid transit is a huge issue in this election and the mayoral candidates were asked about their position on it.

Ross said he is opposed to the proposed light rail system that will cost an estimated \$794 million.

"I believe there are more cost effective versions available," Ross said.

"This is actually a regional issue," Ross said.

But the mayors of the three cities sit on regional council, and each city elects other councillors directly to the region as well.

D'Ailly said there is absolutely no doubt the region must improve its transit.

"The questions are how and when?" d'Ailly said.

If elected, d'Ailly said he will push for a series of public forums where the assumptions behind the light rail proposal are tested and debated.

Ramsoomair said: "Right now we do not have the luxury of spending \$790 million on light rail transit."

The light rail system is something to be considered in the future, Ramsoomair said.

Halloran said the light rail system is not an affordable option. Halloran said she has heard from many constituents who are opposed to it.

"As we are canvassing we are hearing loud and clear and we are listening," Halloran said.

All of the candidates were asked about their vision for connecting the scattered collection of off-road paths and trails for walking and cycling.

D'Ailly said active transportation must be an integral part of the city's transportation planning.

D'Ailly is the only mayoral candidate with a specific plan in place to link important areas of the city with a trail for pedestrians and cyclists. D'Ailly said Waterloo is way behind many other cities when it comes to cycling infrastructure.

Ramsomair said he would appoint an expert panel of students and cyclists to decide where and how to build cycling infrastructure.

The city has been doing a lot for cyclists and pedestrians, Halloran said.

When streets are being upgraded cycling infrastructure is often added, and the city has adopted a Pedestrian Charter, Halloran said.

Halloran said the City of Waterloo aims to be the first in Canada to win a designation as a bicycle friendly community from the League of American Cyclists.

Ross said it is a question of timing and costs and the city should do what it can to get students living closer to campuses so they can walk.

On fluoridation, Halloran is alone in her support for the continuation of the practice.

"I was a nurse for a number of years. I have a daughter who is 21 and has one cavity," Halloran said. "It's all controlled. It follows strict procedures. I drink our water. I have faith in the system."

Ross said it is an ethical issue and one group of people does not have the right to force others to put a chemical into their bodies.

D'Ailly said there are now many ways of getting fluoride to the teeth without putting it in drinking water and because he goes by "the precautionary principle," d'Ailly said he will vote against continued fluoridation of the drinking water.

"I will not be supporting fluoride," Ramsomair said. "Fluoride is a poison."

Waterloo voters will have two referendum questions on their Oct. 25 election ballots. The first deals with fluoridation of the drinking water. The second asks voters if they want their city council to explore the pros and cons of merging with the City of Kitchener.

"It is a very confusing question and that is the main reason you should vote 'no,'" d'Ailly said.

Merger talks should include the whole region and not just Kitchener and Waterloo, d'Ailly said.

"It is a confusing question, it is a costly question," Ramsomair said. "I will vote 'no' to amalgamation."

Good neighbours can co-operate and lend or borrow cups of sugar without getting married, Ramsomair said.

Halloran said she brought forward the motion to put this question on the ballot because she wanted Waterloo voters to decide the city's fate.

If voters in both cities approve the talks, the two city councils will spend the next four years negotiating the issues and then another referendum will be held to ask citizens if they want to amalgamate the two cities, Halloran said.

Ross said: "I am recommending we vote 'no' on the merger question."

Ross said the merger of the two cities would see taxes increase by five per cent in Waterloo and drop slightly in Kitchener according to his back-of-the-envelope calculations.

"I do not believe there are any benefits to a merger at this point in time," Ross said.

The mayoral candidates were also asked about spending tax dollars for the public art in the public square at King Street and Willis Way.

D'Ailly said public art is important, but this bell sculpture is the wrong piece of the art for the public square and it should be moved.

Halloran said the sculpture was selected by a group of citizens and people should embrace it because it would cost too much to move it.

"I think it was a complete waste of money," Ross said.

Ramsomair said the public should have been more involved in the process of selecting public art.

The candidates were also asked about job creation, how to catch-up on the backlog of old roads, sewers, water mains and sidewalks that need replacing and arts and culture.

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