

Dufferin?Caledon candidates square off in provincial election debate

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Residents of Dufferin-Caledon had the opportunity to bring their biggest concerns to the candidates running in the local riding ahead of the provincial election.

Dufferin Board of Trade (DBOT) hosted the first of three provincial election debates on Tuesday, February 18, at Theatre Orangeville.

The debate consisted of questions created by DBOT, as well as questions from constituents.

Candidates present for the debate included Sandy Brown (Green Party), Kris Eggleton (New Blue Party), George Nakitsas (New Democratic Party), Jeffery Halsall (Independent), and Michael Dehn (Liberal Party).

Incumbent Progressive Conservative candidate Sylvia Jones was not in attendance for the February 18 debate.

The Orangeville Citizen reached out to Jones for comment and received a statement regarding her absence.

?During this important campaign, I am focused on taking my message about protecting Ontario to constituents directly. I will continue to do what I have always done, meet with constituents, meet people in their homes by door knocking and attending events. Throughout this campaign, my volunteers and I have been speaking to thousands of people in their homes across Dufferin-Caledon.?

During the debate, residents asked candidates about their positions on protecting farmland, long-term care living, food insecurity, housing affordability, and the threat of tariffs by U.S. President Donald Trump.

What will you or your party do to protect Ontario's farmland from urban sprawl and non-agricultural development and ensure land use planning policies will balance growth with the need to preserve farmland?

Nakitsas: Protecting our farmland is critical, but there are two threats. One is development, the other one is congestion; building highways like the 413 when you have alternatives like making the 407, which is empty [and] toll-free. Actually, create urban public transit rather than building new highways. In terms of development, we have to explore many other alternatives than destroying farmlands and Greenbelt. Legalizing fourplexes, looking at other measures such as these, that have been in demand, can minimize that threat.

Dehn: We have the Greenbelt added in the Town of Erin and I would continue to add to the Greenbelt, which protects land from severances. You cannot do a lot of development, but you can still do farming. The other thing I would look at is ? secondary ag is pretty easy to develop, maybe it's time we re-look at protecting that just like it is primary ag.

How does your party plan to improve the quality of employment and worker protections in Ontario?

Brown: We have to create more jobs. We need to create more good jobs. I know locally, we've been supporting skilled trades and introducing youth skilled trades here. I think that's really the crux of the issue. We have to get people into good-paying jobs. We have to convince our young people that the career path in the skilled trades is a good one.

Dehn: I look at a living wage region by region in Ontario because it is different all over Ontario. The costs here in Wellington,

Dufferin and Caledon are much higher than they are in London and Kitchener. So, region-by-region living is a good start. What I started in the Town of Erin is looking at ground pits. Once they're done, they're done. Rehab them, put in slabs, tiny homes, municipal wells, municipal septic ? owned by the municipality. There's no profit in these homes, but they're employment homes.

What are your individual party's plans to deal with Donald Trump's tariffs?

Eggleton: When Trump threatens things like tariffs, he does it for various reasons. He does it to get what he wants, to make a deal, or even to keep people focused on something else while he's doing something else. I think it's a good opportunity for us to work with our country and other provinces. We need to start taking away the border problems we have with inter-province trading. We can build relationships with other countries to not rely on the U.S. We rely very heavily on just the U.S. and that's never a good business plan for anybody.

Halsall: I've said for years, we need to put Canada first and support our own. We have, I think, enough resources in Canada to be able to sustain ourselves. I'm glad that now people are waking up to that because of this. I'm a big advocate for keeping things local, keeping things Canadian, and I think it starts with every one of us remembering that before you buy something on Amazon, look in your community at where you can buy what you need.

What is your plan to not leave a generation behind, or to put pressure on the generation coming after it to care for their parents?

Brown: We need to invest in home care so that we can age gracefully where we live, if possible. We also need to invest in long-term care. I was involved, as the mayor, in introducing development charges for long-term care here in Orangeville and we now have a new long-term care build happening here. We need more long-term care for sure and I think some of the new models that are coming out are fantastic.

Nakitsas: I was really excited when MPP Wayne Gates introduced a bill for home care support credit, which I think is critical because more and more seniors would like to live in their homes. We need to start building more houses too and part of our New Homes Ontario plan is directed at long-term care homes, because private homes have not had a very good record. We saw that during the pandemic so we need to find alternatives there, especially since they've been shutting down so quickly. Building non-profit municipal-type long-term care homes, I think, have been very critical. We have to stop the forced relocation of patients away from their families.

The Dufferin Board of Trade will host another Provincial Election Debate for the Dufferin-Caledon riding tonight (February 20) from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. at the Grace Tipling Hall in Shelburne.

Ontarians will take to the polls on February 27.