

Hopefuls for mayor go at it at Chamber meetings

By Bill Rea

Public process keeps coming up in the discussions between the five people running for mayor of Caledon, and that was the case at two sessions last week.

The meetings, one in Bolton and the other in Caledon East, were hosted by the Caledon Chamber of Commerce.

Councillor Allan Thompson is stressing his experience on both Town and Peel Regional councils, as well as his background in business and as a volunteer.

'If you want to get things done, you engage everybody,' he said.

Former councillor Nancy Stewart reminded the audience in Bolton that Caledon will be getting its first new mayor in 11 years, and she pointed to her experience as an advocate and a councillor.

'Town Hall is broken,' she added. 'A fresh, less complicated approach is needed.'

Stewart also said council would be open and transparent if she becomes mayor, with the public being involved at the start of processes.

'I work hard and get things done,' she said.

Gary Cascone pointed out that Caledon is unique, adding that's what brought him here.

'It has the correct balance we won for our family,' he said.

But he said he's noticed problems over the years, through urban sprawl, massive warehouse developments and gridlock. Dealing with the problem will require a strong and confident new leader.

'It's time to put Bolton back on track,' Former councillor Ian Sinclair commented at the first meeting. 'Bolton had a future and it's floundering now.'

Sinclair also pointed out people are concerned about truck traffic, but he said things are going to get worse with the GTA's East-West Corridor being studied and the possibility of a new highway (informally referred to as Highway 413).

As well, he said Bolton's retail sector is in trouble, as the area deals with no long-term plan, no representation on major land-use issues and high taxes.

George Niras said his mission is to make Caledon the most livable community in Canada, as he also promised to improve programs and services.

'I will inspire public confidence and trust,' he said, adding there has to be teamwork and partnership with the community.

The issue of the trail system in Caledon came up, and Thompson said money has been put into the Town's budget to upgrade it every year. He added there's an extensive network of trails, along with the opportunity to create new ones.

He also pointed out trails represent a great opportunity to get people out and exercising.

Stewart said trails are special to her, as she pointed to the trail connections in Station Park in Palgrave, where she lives.

'Trails are very, very precious,' she said, calling for community-based projects to maintain them.

Cascone agreed trails are important for walking and exercise. 'I find myself walking a lot more,' he said.

He pointed to the need to engage the community to tell what the major needs are of the trail system. 'I will listen to them and act accordingly,' he said.

Sinclair commented on the need for north-south trails, as well as a trail system along the Credit River to Mississauga.

Niras agreed with the need for community consultation and feedback so the trails will attract more use.

Addressing issues of tax increases and keeping projects within budget, Thompson said things are not as bad as some people might believe.

'With no taxes, you don't operate,' he said.

Pointing to the development of the Caledon Equestrian Park for the Pan Am Games, he said there's going to be no tax impact on Caledon.

He also pointed to plans for a new fire hall in Bolton, commenting that's a growth-related development, so development charges will help cover that.

Thompson also said the Town has some \$74 million in reserves, adding it's been working on a long-range financial plan since 2011.

Stewart wasn't buying the assurances over the Pan Am Games, arguing the Town has taken on a 20-year debenture.

'We've got to get back to budgeting,' she declared, adding the public has to get input early in the budget process.

She also said tax increases have to be in line with the cost of living, and she said the Town should not be adding names to the Sunshine List.

As a businessman, Cascone said if he loses money on a project, he has to absorb it, and not pass it on to other clients.

‘We have to run the Town like a business,’ he remarked.

Sinclair commented tax increases have been about twice the rate of inflation, yet he said money has been wasted on things like the Equestrian Park, wayside pits and what he called a non-functional sports park.

Niras said the Town doesn't collect all the development charges it legally could, as he stressed the need to be innovative and keep growing to get than money.

Explaining why he wants to be mayor, Thompson said he's lived in Caledon all his life.

‘Caledon is one of the most beautiful places in the world,’ he said, adding he wants to move that passion forward.

He also said there is currently a great opportunity to plan how the Town moves forward, and with community involvement, he said they will be able to plan development and manage costs.

‘I care very deeply about Caledon,’ Stewart commented, adding she has the necessary business experience and leadership qualities for the job.

Cascone said a lot of people are frustrated at not seeing what they should see. He added he's got about five decades of business experience, commenting it's time to stop running government by politics.

‘I'd like to be mayor because I respect Caledon values,’ Sinclair said.

‘The landscape of Caledon is just amazing,’ he added, pointing out each community is different and that's part of the fascination.

Niras said he wants to keep Caledon on the right path, improving mobility in the area, adding to the tree cover and saving green space.

There was agreement on the need to attract small and medium-sized businesses to town.

Thompson said these are the businesses that hire people and sponsor sports teams. He said the rezoning process needs to be improved and red tape reduced, while rolling out the ‘red carpet.’

He also said the Town of Halton Hills has created a process to help businesses coming in and guide them through the process.

‘Maybe you should have rolled out the red carpet the last years you were on council,’ Stewart told him, adding there are people who have the idea that Caledon is not open for business. She said business people going to Town Hall get the idea they're ‘talking to a wall.’

Cascone said small business people shake their heads when asked what the Town does for them.

He said there's a lot of frustration, adding the Chamber of Commerce needs to be revitalized and involved with business.

Sinclair told the Bolton audience that residents of the village and surrounding area need to be encouraged to shop there and explore its uniqueness.

Niras said the best way to help business is to increase the consumer population. With controlled growth, business activity will increase and more people will be employed.

Thompson defended the proposed Canadian Tire development in Bolton, although he admitted the public process could have been a lot better. But he did say it will benefit the community, with some 100,000 square feet of office space. He added a lot of Caledon residents work for Canadian Tire.

‘Caledon did win with Canadian Tire, but the process was flawed,’ he said. ‘Lessons learned. Going forward, this will not happen again.’

‘Do you trust your council?’ Stewart asked the Bolton audience, adding it will take a long time to earn the trust back. ‘You people got cheated out of a public process.’

Cascone agreed the process was flawed, adding it's not the only time it's happened. He also commented on the traffic nightmare on Reginal Road 50 between 6 and 9 a.m. Highway improvements are coming, but he said they will take years.

‘There's quite a problem here,’ Sinclair observed. ‘There's a ‘done-deal’ mentality on council right now.’

He cited other examples, such as Brampton Brick's proposal to put fill in the mined pits at the Cheltenham Brickworks, Olympia Sand and Gravel site near Melville, etc.

When it comes to creating jobs, Cascone told the audience in Caledon East of the need to open dialogue with the Chamber of Commerce. He said there have been a lot of businesses close, and there is the need for the Chamber to be an advocate.

Thompson agreed the Chamber and Town both have a role to play, and he said he would work to bring them together.

‘We cannot do it alone,’ he remarked.

Stewart promised to open lines of communication with the Chamber.

‘My door will always be open,’ she said.

Sinclair stressed the need for the Town's building and planning departments to stop chasing businesses out of town.

He also said there needs to be a shop local program all over town.

Niras called for strengthening the Chamber membership.

The staff levels at the Town were discussed at Caledon East.

Sinclair pointed out in his time on council, staff came from all over the GTA. Competitive salaries have to be offered to attract the best applicants.

Stewart said there are efficiencies to be found. "It's our job to find them," she said.

Niras advocated getting rid of waste by doing away with the area council positions.

Thompson pointed out Caledon takes up a large geographic area, requiring a certain number of staff, but he also agreed there's always room for efficiencies.

Cascone said he ran a business for many years. He said he looks for the right attitude in prospective employees, then he trains them.

Addressing questions on the GTA East-West Corridor, Thompson said when it comes, it will represent an economic corridor. He said Highway 407 has been a good example where businesses have sprung up around it. Lands beside highway add up to revenue, he said.

"This is a major economic boom to the Town," Stewart said, adding Caledon needs to embrace it.

Sinclair said it represents the single biggest development in Caledon's history, but he also said it will drive more truck traffic into places like Caledon village.

"We're not ready," he said, adding disappointment that the current council hasn't done anything about it.

Cascone said it will be good for the Town and attract business.

"Do you all think it's a good idea?" one woman in the audience called out. "I don't."

Sinclair said he doesn't agree with it. He recalled times when he rode horses in the Don Valley before the construction of the Parkway.

"What a disaster!" he said.

"I don't want it at all, but it's going to come," he added.

Cascone said it's going to come, so Caledon has to be involved with the process.

Thompson agreed, especially as he pointed out it's going to cut through farmland.



Candidates Ian Sinclair, Nancy Stewart, George Niras, Allan Thompson and Gary Cascone squared off at last week's meeting in Bolton, hosted by the Caledon Chamber of Commerce. Photo by Bill Rea