

With deep roots in Caledon, Councillor Innis is passionate to connect the community

By Rob Paul

Falling in love with a community like Caledon, with its natural beauty and plethora of recreation options, isn't a hard task, especially when you've got family roots going back hundreds of years.

Those family links have kept Regional Councillor Jennifer Innis in Caledon for most her life and now she's hoping to continue to shape the community for her children and her children's children as she completes her second term.

With roots that run deep, Innis has always found herself keen about community progress and caring for the place she calls home, and that's what led her to municipal politics.

"My family has been in the community for five generations, my children are the sixth to be raised on our family farm," she said. "Seeing a lot of change over time, I wanted to ensure that the community and the Caledon that I grew to love would still be here when my children are growing. I know that we're growing and changing because that comes with time, but I wanted to make sure that the sense of community and the reason why Caledon is Caledon is protected. The best way to do that is to be part of the decision-making process and that's what led me to run."

The love of the Caledon community and drive to represent it is in Innis' blood as numerous family members have committed themselves to a similar calling to help the Town in any way they can.

"Family is very important and so is community and that's something that's been well established within my family," she says. "My great-grandfather was the Reeve of Albion and my great-great-grandfather on the other side was a councillor. There's a long history of public service in my family; my grandmother was one of the first volunteers for Caledon Meals on Wheels and delivered for 20 years until she could no longer. It's really about having the opportunity to give back to the community that you love and that gives back to you. There's that expression, 'it takes a village to raise a child'; well, I think one of the things that's so great about Caledon is that even though we're a community of communities, it's really a place where people know their neighbours and they care about their neighbours and they care about their community and they care about the land that they get to enjoy."

"My passion really stems from my family and the way that I was raised and just having the benefit of spending my life here. Not a lot of people can say 'and I'm realizing this as I'm getting older' that they have friends who they started kindergarten with who now have children the same age. We've gone all the way through school together and while we've all gone our separate paths, many have come back to Caledon to raise their family here because it's such a great place to raise a family."

An initiative Innis has been passionate about in her time on Council is connecting Caledon in an environmentally friendly way that showcases all the surrounding nature while encouraging residents to get outside and take in all the community has to offer.

"Anytime that you can make a difference and can help somebody and see how it impacts their everyday life, it's rewarding," she said. "They are your friends, neighbours, and community, but I think for this term in particular my focus really has been on connecting communities. I'm really proud of the work I've done on the Toronto Region Conservation Authority as their Chair. Building their trail strategy and really focusing on connecting people to nature, which is something that really comes firsthand when you're from Caledon. The acquisition of 62.6 hectares of land added to Albion Hills Conservation Area, that's green space that will be protected and preserved and can be used by our residents. I think especially during the pandemic everyone has realized the need for green spaces and how important it is for not only our physical well-being but also our mental well-being."

"Along with those trail strategies and the trail networks in Caledon, promoting active transportation. The bicycle friendly community designation was something I worked really hard for. I went to the share the road conference and came back and

established a cycling task force through Council. We worked really hard to make improvements so we could become a cycling friendly community. Even things like adding paved shoulders as we start to rebuild and reconstruct roads, that's great for active transportation and cyclists, and it's also great for our taxpayers because the paved shoulders save us money in the long run for deterioration and road repairs.?

Looking further into the future, Innis is proud of the work she and Council have done to connect Caledon beyond its own community and make transportation throughout the GTA easier as the Town grows.

?To stay on the topic of connecting community, the work we've done on securing the Caledon-Vaughan GO Line,? she said. ?I was the one who asked for the MZO to protect and designate those lands for a future GO Train because we really have to start planning. If we're going to grow to 300,000 people and another 150,000 jobs, we need to make sure we're connect, and it can't just be through road networks. We need public transit and active transportation. Securing those lands for a GO Train that hopefully my kids and their kids will be able to use will help connect the community to the rest of the GTA. That's huge and I'm really proud of [it] and we're working to build a community around it that is a transit-oriented community that has the look and the feel and respect for the surrounding green spaces.?

Knowing connecting the community goes beyond transportation options, Innis has championed the development and expansion of the Town Hall Campus in Caledon East in an effort to help it become a go-to community hub.

?Creating those initiatives has been great, also for the community in Caledon East, the Town Hall Campus. By the time my term is done, we'll have added a swimming pool, gymnasium, walking track; we'll move the library into this space, and there will be space for the Caledon Parent-Child Centre to run programming,? she said. ?It's becoming a community hub and most recently we had Council support Councillor (Nick) deBoer and I in establishing a permanent rink at that location. Something that's near in dear to me, I'm bringing forward a motion soon to name that ?Reese's Rink.' We lost a young boy (Reese Meyer) a year ago to cancer, and especially during the pandemic, it pulled the community together. We're going to name it after him and it really will be a great outdoor space for the youth in our community to gather and be kids. We're really excited about the transformation occurring at the Town Hall Campus because it really is the community hub that connects the community together whether you're young or old and no matter your abilities. There's something there for everybody and I think that's really what community is about and it's a lasting legacy for our community to enjoy.?

In Innis' eyes, Caledon is a unique setting due to its sheer size and environmental surroundings, and she believes that although Caledon is growing, that's something that needs to continue to be the crown jewel of the community.

?Growing up on a farm, I know I was fortunate to have space and as someone who loves to hike and cycle and be outdoors, I think a lot of people move here or visit here because of our green spaces and how beautiful it is,? she said. ?That's something we need to not only promote but protect it and it's a balancing act as we grow. I think we really need to look at building resilient communities that are connected and that we create opportunities and spaces for people to connect with nature but also one another. That's what Caledon really is about.?

There's plenty of key aspects to being a successful Councillor, but Innis says, above all else, teamwork is imperative along with smart planning that looks far beyond the current state of the community.

?Especially as a Regional Councillor, I think first and foremost the most important thing is teamwork because you can never do anything alone,? she said. ?Not everyone is always going to agree, but you always have the mutual respect to learn, grow, and understand one another. Every motion that I've ever brought forward, whether at the Town or Region, I have to get the support of the majority of my colleagues. Understanding the needs and pressures of your current community but also what is going to come and understanding the big picture and being able to create a plan on how to get there is extremely important. When we had new Councillors this term, I gave them the example that in my very first year being elected I immediately started working on the revitalization for Palgrave and Caledon East because they're big projects. Palgrave took my entire first term on Council?municipal government moves slow?and Caledon East is going to see that same transformation, but because of its scale and scope it's going to

take even longer. That work will commence at the end of this year, and it will take two to three years to finish. I think having the big picture plan and charting out how to get there and working as a team is what helps you be successful.?

Difficult situations can arise from representing such a large constituency, and even though not everyone will always side with Council's decisions, Innis thinks as long as community is being put first then you're doing the job you were elected to do.

?It's a challenging job and it's hard to leave things at the door when you're done at the end of the day and it's hard to turn off the phone and not take to heart comments on social media but I think you have to remind yourself why you're there and make decisions where you can look at yourself in the mirror the next day,? she said. ?As long as you're constantly reminding yourself why you're there and what's important, then it gives you the strength to keep going forward.?