

Ward 9 candidates debate passion versus geography

London Community News

It is a question that has seemingly come up at every ward's all-candidates meeting and has essentially split those running for a seat at city hall between supporting it or not.

No, not whether or not to continue with the fluoridation (although it came up again too), but rather the question of whether a candidate needs to live in the ward he or she is running in.

Although it was just one of many questions the Ward 9 candidates received during their all-candidates debate on Thursday (Oct. 9) it was one that seemed to generate not only compelling answers, but also presented a clear difference in political philosophies.

Hosted by the Urban League, London Public Library, and Women & Politics, the Ward 9 debate was held before a packed audience of approximately 150 people at the Byron library.

Running in the ward to replace Dale Henderson, who decided not to run for re-election, are: Ali Chahbar, Ed Corrigan, Doreen Gysbers, Eric Haidar, Anna Hopkins, Frank Minifie (who didn't attend the debate) and Jeff Schiller.

Although many in the audience struggled with sound issues at the venue, they heard clearly some candidates favour passion over geography.

Hopkins, for example, has lived in the Byron area for 30 years, but in 1997 she moved to the Reservoir Hill area. In 2010, the ward boundaries were redrawn with Springbank Drive being used to divide wards 9 and 10.

The redrawing of a line, Hopkins said, shouldn't define someone's ability to serve his or her community.

"I am on the (Ward) 10 side, the park is on the (Ward) 9 side," Hopkins said. "Boundaries will change in the future as well, but my commitment to my community will not."

Gysbers once served as a councillor in the Township of Strathroy-Caradoc, but then moved out of the area and felt "uncomfortable" she was representing people there, despite still having a farm and tending to it every day.

Four years ago, she decided not to run again, a decision she said surprised many of her former constituents.

"Now, the fact is I am living here. You can speak to people walking down the street, talk to your neighbours, you will be stopped when you are shopping, you have to get used to that as a councillor," Gysbers said. "It is really important you live in that ward, take the time to talk to everyone in your daily travels."

Schiller said he has never hid the fact he doesn't live in the ward, but in fact resides in Delaware, "four-and-a-half kilometres outside the London border." However, having moved his business to the area 15 years ago, he is certainly a part of the community in many people's minds.

One in particular might be an area resident named Judith who he met while canvassing.

"She is a single mom and she rents, she can't afford a house, she used to own one, but the property taxes made her sell. She can't find a job, she goes from one six-month contract to another," Schiller said. "When she was done telling me that, I told her where I lived, she said 'I don't really care where you live. You seem like the kind of person who will move London forward' and she now has a sign on her property."

Chahbar's residency is actually at the centre of his reason to run in Ward 9.

Currently living in Hyde Park, Chahbar said his situation was made somewhat problematic as he and his wife had an offer in a house in Byron where they were looking to move.

Ultimately, he decided Ward 9 was where he was going to live, so it would also where he wanted to run for council. However, it doesn't change his feelings on where someone should live when running for council.

"Yes it is important, but in a sense, are you telling me if you live a kilometre or two outside an artificially drawn boundary or border you are somehow less able to represent the interests of London?" Chahbar said. "I don't think (where he lives) would compromise my ability in the least to be a passionate voice on council."

Corrigan, who served on city council from 2000-2003, has lived in the ward for 53 years. That experience, he said, makes him a part of the community and gives him knowledge and "living experience" that can't be easily replaced.



Ward 9 candidates (from left) Eric Haidar, Doreen Gysbers, Anna Hopkins, Ali Chahbar, Ed Corrigan and Jeff Schiller took part in the all-candidates meeting held on Thursday (Oct. 9) at the Byron library. Frank Minifie didn't attend.

While Corrigan said living in the ward for more than five decades is an advantage for him, he was quick to take shots at those who he doesn't feel quite match up.

"You can vote for someone who lives in Delaware, Hyde Park, or even outside the boundary, that is your choice," Corrigan said. "I would rather vote for somebody who is part of the community, lives in the community, and is here with you."