

The Advance

Wednesday, October 3, 2018



Standing-room only at Flesherton all-candidates meeting Thursday

(by Don Crosby)

There's a great interest among voters for information about candidates in the upcoming Grey Highlands municipal election, as evidenced by a standing-room only crowd at the latest all-candidates meeting in Flesherton.

The high interest also shows in numerous all-candidate meetings for Lake Eugenia and Brewster's Lake; Flesherton, Markdale and Kimberley, and a meet-and-greet planned for Saturday at the Flesherton Farmer's Market.

Much of the discussion last Wednesday was about tourism and economic development. The meeting was sponsored by the Grey Highlands Chamber of Commerce, which posed the first four questions to be answered by all candidates on those topics.

There was almost unanimous agreement on what kind of tourism would be good for Grey Highlands. Everyone agreed that accommodations were badly needed.

(Mayoral candidates will be marked as M and Deputy-Mayor as DM, all the remaining are candidates for council)

Paul Allen said those that promote health and wellness, such as hiking and cycling, as well a business and conference centre would be welcome.

Having operated a business in Eugenia for several years Stewart Halliday (DM) would like to see more entrepreneurs. Aakash Desai (DM) favours adventure-based businesses.

Terry Mokriy (M) wants more tourism-related businesses and for council to work more closely with the tourism industry.

Paul McQueen (M) also thinks more accommodation is needed for both residents and visitors.

Danielle Valiquette would like to see more agri-tourism and heritage tourism.

Lynn Silvertown said more should be done to help Talisman, which will be a huge anchor business, as well as heritage tourism to work more closely with First Nations.

Dane Nielsen agrees with promoting adventure tourism and the need for more accommodation to keep people visiting the area to remain longer.

Cathy Little would like to see more night life and entertainment, as well as eco-tourism and adventure tourism.

Libby Howell favours more tourism related businesses.

For Wayne Balon the answer is accommodation for tourists.

Tom Allwood favours more accommodation, agri-tourism and business development of new businesses like microbreweries.

On the question of "what is more important building new homes or rehabilitating older existing ones?" there was consensus that both are important for different reasons.

What was more relevant was the need for a variety of accommodation, said Nielson. There are advantages to both said McQueen (M) and economic development relies on both.

Desai (DM) favours new homes and the revitalization of existing homes and store fronts. Halliday (DM) said council just approved construction of 526 new homes. What's needed now are more shoppers and more retail stores.

Paul Allen favours new homes. Wayne Balon said there is a need to spruce up downtown Markdale which would encourage visitors to the area to stop and shop.

The question of how the chamber of commerce and the municipality should work together brought a variety of responses: from a closer partnership between the two to listen more closely to the chamber.

Desai (DM) said the chamber of commerce plays an advisory role. Valiquette said it's important to build a strong relationship between the two, and to encourage the chamber to promote new businesses.

Lynn Silverton said she has seen big improvements since the amalgamation of the two local chambers a few years ago, which also resulted in a closer relationship with the municipality. Nielsen said it's important that the two work together. Cathy Little said collaboration between the municipality and the chamber of commerce would promote economic development.

Howell said they should work together to promote new ideas. Balon said they have a municipal relationship in bringing new businesses to the municipality.

The question of what businesses are missing from the downtown core resulted in a variety of responses, from more eating places to more retail stores.

Desai (DM) said there is a need to improve the atmosphere for all businesses.

Balon mentioned businesses that promote local food and camping stores. For Howell, it's more retail stores and agri-businesses.

Cathy Little supports the idea of an anchor business like Sobey's. Nielsen commented that if he knew the answer, he would have started it already. Silverton named accommodation, transportation and trying to keep a florist in town.

Valiquette said businesses that support tourism like camping stores were needed as well as more office space.

McQueen (M) said there was a need to create definite business hours and that adventure businesses are important. Mokriy (M) said it's the responsibility of municipality to support businesses and not tell them what to do.

There was a question about why residents should trust politicians.

We have to trust staff members who have worked to promote economic growth said Lynn Silverton. Allwood recommended people ask candidates about what their track record is like. People must be given credit for running, Cathy Little said.

Allen said he had bought a business with one tenant and now it has seven and another one to come – that's economic development.

Halliday (DM) said he helped promote economic development in Eugenia.

Desai (DM) said that investment in time by the candidates and councillors is key to judging their commitment.

Mokriy (M) said he understands the skepticism, but his reason for running for mayor is to give back to the community that treated him and his wife so well when they arrived in Grey Highlands. "My word is my bond," he said.

Balon said he considered that now is the time to stand up and be one municipality. Desai (DM) said we need to trust and not to build walls around communities.

On the question of affordable housing, McQueen (M) said it's time to encourage more diversity such as garden suites for aging parents. He recognized the need to review planning policy to allow houses to be built that are smaller than the current minimum, and said that the Grey County OP is looking into that.

Mokriy (M) said there is a need to review zoning bylaw to make it user friendly and easier.

Nielsen said it's important to make sure housing is available for everyone.

Candidates were asked what could be done to encourage young people to stay in the area.

Valiquette said better WiFi would aid in companies operating and providing jobs in the area. Allwood said Markdale has high-speed internet. He doesn't want Grey Highlands to become a bedroom community. He said there is a need to create affordable housing. He suggested being innovative with development charges. Balon suggested asking the youth what they want.

McQueen (M) said that there are jobs out there if young people want to work.

Halliday (DM) said that Grey County has the lowest unemployment rate in the province, yet there are 800 jobs nobody wants. Desai (DM) said youth are being unfairly targeted for being not ambitious.

The Grey County Federation of Agriculture wanted to know what place candidates thought that agriculture will play in the future of Grey Highlands.

Several candidates said the future of farming is micro-farming. Lots of people can't afford to get a start with traditional farming which has become too costly.

Little wants changes to the OP to encourage on-farm diversification.

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture wants changes to the property tax system for farmers, because soaring land values mean that farmers are shouldering more of the municipal tax burden percentage-wise.

Allwood said the proposed plan 'A Place to Grow' includes plans to encourage small scale farming. He said the agri-food business in Ontario is bigger than the auto industry.

Balon noted that youth can't afford to get into farming due to high start-up costs. He'd like to see the cost of farmland come down. One young farmer said that would devalue current owner's land.

Issue of long-term care was raised. McQueen (M) noted that the province has promised 15,000 new beds. All Rockwood Terrace needs is 28 more beds, he said.

Mokriy (M) said Grey Highlands had been outmanoeuvred by Grey County. Forget county council and go directly to Ministry of health he said. Involve local MPs. Don't ask but demand.

Halliday (DM) said he was totally disgusted with Grey council. He wants a change to the weighted voting system to take away the stronghold by Owen Sound.

Residents had a lot of food for thought after the meeting.

Gary Gingras, a former owner of a tourism resort on Lake Eugenia, commented that Grey Highlands is not market-ready with needed accommodations.

“Many of our businesses are not friendly. People feel that,” he said, claiming that a call to four of the accommodations in the area will get voicemail.

“Accommodations are important but people don’t come for accommodation they come for experience. And if it’s a great experience they will want to stay. The goal is to get people to visit and then move here,” he said.

“If we fix up our downtown that locals want to use, then travellers will want to stop. They are just not going to want to stop just because we have more hotels,” Gingras said.

Tex Brown said the meeting was informative and has helped him decide how he’ll vote.

He said nothing was said about infrastructure, and commented that sidewalks in Flesherton are badly in need of repair.