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No surprises at local debate

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Published on Oct 13, 2006

There were few fireworks at the first of a series of all candidates meeting in Flamborough Tuesday night. Maybe it's too early yet for election fever, or maybe the timing of the first all-candidates' meeting for mayoralty and Flamborough Ward councilor candidates fell too close after the Thanksgiving weekend. Whatever the reason, Tuesday night's meeting at the North Wentworth Arena at Clappison's Corners, was for the most part, a lackluster affair. No burning issues or fireworks emerged.

Organized by the de-amalgamation group, the Committee to Free Flamborough (CFF), the meeting drew a small crowd of about 50 residents. Ward 15's incumbent Margaret McCarthy was there along with her sole challenger in the race, Judi Partridge. Six of the seven mayoralty candidates also attended. Joining incumbent mayor Larry Di Ianni at the debate were Fred Eisenberger, Diane Elms, Gino Speziale, Martin Zuliniak and Michael Baldasaro. Mayoralty candidate Steve Leach didn't attend.

The biggest election promises came from Zuliniak who pledged that if elected mayor on Nov. 13, he will reduce taxes by 10 per cent for everyone in the City of Hamilton and "cut Flamborough free" from its forced amalgamation with the city. While such a proclamation would likely have drawn loud applause from a larger partisan crowd, it got only polite applause from the audience.

Dennis Noonan, media relations officer for the CFF, moderated the meeting. Before inviting questions from the floor, he asked the candidates two questions selected from many submitted by the general public to the group's website (media@freeflamborough.org) in the weeks leading up to the meeting.

On the question about whether they support the concept of area-rating, a system by which residents pay only for the municipal services they receive, most candidates agreed that it is a good system that should be retained. McCarthy said she has been fighting for its retention since 2004 when it became open for debate at the council table where some have argued for its demise. She said area-rating means a \$750 reduction annually on Flamborough municipal tax bills, but if discontinued would also mean a three per cent reduction for taxpayers in Hamilton's city core.

Partridge said she "supports area-rating 100 per cent." She talked of the need to educate urban councillors about the differences between rural and urban life, adding she would like to bring city councillors on a tour of rural Flamborough.

Di Ianni, Elms and Eisenberger also spoke in support of area-rating. Zuliniak reiterated his promise to set Flamborough free while Baldasaro said, "I support equal and fair taxes." Speziale said he's undecided about the issue. Pointing out that people with no children pay school taxes, he advocated looking at things "as a whole" and "working together" much like a family to resolve differences.

Asked if Flamborough should be allowed to keep the close to \$5 million in annual revenue that comes from slots at Flamboro Downs to help offset its taxes and pay for infrastructure projects, Di Ianni and Eisenberger both agreed that the money should stay in Flamborough rather than go into general city coffers. Elms argued that all city infrastructure projects should be looked at and funded on an equal basis and "shouldn't be separated."

Zuliniak said Hamilton shouldn't take the slot money and should provide a compensation package to Flamborough. Speziale went out on a limb again and suggested the slots money would be better spent if

given to the 9,000 Hamilton children who go to school hungry every day.

Advocating that the money remain in Flamborough, Partridge said there are "serious infrastructure needs" to be addressed. Waterdown residents are dependent on only one water pipe coming up the escarpment from Hamilton and there are longstanding infrastructure issues with the water services in both Carlisle and Freulton, she noted.

McCarthy said she is "on record" as fighting to maintain the slot money for Flamborough. "It should stay in the municipality that created it," she said of the revenue, noting that policing and road maintenance issues have resulted from the presence of the gambling facility in Flamborough.

The mayoralty candidates left the meeting early because of a commitment to attend another debate in Rockton. That left just McCarthy and Partridge to answer questions from the audience.

One of the most contentious came from Chris Wonnacott, who traveled from London, Ontario to ask what the councilor candidates would do about city employees and accountability when a city project goes wrong and problems are encountered. Wonnacott, one of the partners in PCN Construction, which helped build the new skatepark facility in Waterdown's Memorial Park, is concerned about the city's handling of his company's statement of claim for work done at the park. A lawsuit is pending since the company put a lien on the project in July claiming that the city owes them \$330,000 for the work but is refusing to pay.

McCarthy was reluctant to comment publicly on the issue as "it's in the courts right now." Advising Wonnacott that it is "incumbent on me to protect your privacy," she offered to discuss the issue with him privately and try to arrange a meeting between the business partners and city lawyers.

Saying that she didn't want to speak directly to the issue, but rather to "the symptoms of the issue," Partridge said she favours remediation over litigation because the latter is expensive for taxpayers. "We need to re-examine how we do projects, particularly at city hall," she said.

The Ward 15 candidates also fielded questions on school accommodation in Waterdown, what they would do if offered money for their campaigns by St. Mary's Cement (proponents of a quarry in northeast Flamborough) and their position on a de-amalgamation referendum and the proposed Mid-Peninsula Highway that will run from Fort Erie, through much of rural Flamborough to the Burlington area.

Their positions were similar on all issues. Partridge advocated that strong relationships be built between the ward councilor and the two local school boards in trying to ensure that sufficient school accommodation is available for the expected growth in Waterdown. McCarthy spoke of her ongoing battle to get Hamilton council to accept a plan that would see developers guarantee space for, and facilitate the building of, new schools before subdivisions are approved.

Both candidates said they would not accept campaign donations from St. Mary's Cement.

A minor skirmish arose after McCarthy said she has accepted "no contributions from anyone ever." Partridge said she would like to see the Municipal Act amended so that all the expenses and cash donations involving each candidate are made public. That type of information is already available to the public, McCarthy responded.

McCarthy and Partridge both favour a referendum on de-amalgamation and oppose a proposed MPH route through Flamborough.

"It would most certainly dissect this community," McCarthy said of the highway, noting that she doesn't see the rationale for the need of the highway to come through Flamborough. Partridge said there is a need for the major highway but she doesn't support the design and proposed routing of it through Flamborough.

The next all-candidates' meeting hosted by the CFF will take place next Tuesday (October 17) at 7:30 p.m. at the Rockton Fair Building. Mayoralty hopefuls will join the two Ward 14 candidates, Grant Maloney and Rob Pasuta, for a debate on the issues.



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