

Hamilton's Ward 1 candidates back LRT, address housing "crisis" in Cable 14 debate

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By Kevin Werner

In one of the few ward council debates, there was near unanimity among Ward 1 candidates for Hamilton to construct the \$1 billion light-rail transit system.

Sophie Geffros, who uses a wheelchair, said she has in the past waited "hours and hours in the dead of night, in the freezing cold" a bus.

"LRT is the only, truly accessible mass transit that is available to us right now," said Geffros. "Implementing it is not just a matter of transit. It's a matter of justice."

Lyla Miklos said building the LRT system is about investing in a renewable resource that will benefit future generations.

"If you even want a city to address affordable housing you better be able to move people around," she said.

Maureen Wilson, an urban planner, who was former mayor Bob Wade's chief of staff for two years, also backs LRT. But beyond building the controversial project, Wilson advocated for "investing with purpose" to rebuild Hamilton's aging infrastructure and address its \$3 billion infrastructure deficit. It means, she said, growing the city's assessment along the LRT's east-west corridor.

Harrison White, who supports LRT, said Hamilton's transit system has been "ineffective," with the city failing to implement important bus routes.

"The people of Hamilton deserve better," he said.

Carol Lazich, a prominent community opponent of LRT, said the project is an "antiquated" system that will prove unsuccessful. She said a study conducted by the city's former transit director David Dixon stated that bus rapid transit will be better and more efficient than LRT.

"Because our ridership is too low and every year based on our own statistics ... the ridership keeps going down."

Lazich supports funding the city's BLAST transit network that will provide bus service to all Hamilton areas and not just the downtown.

"The growth is happening in Binbrook, in Waterdown. Those people need to be invested with transit."

The other top-of-mind issues that the 11 out of the 13 candidates who participated in what was a generally cordial Cable 14 debate was affordable housing. Geffros wanted to expand the city's affordable housing stock, while also licensing landlords.

Wilson acknowledged there is an "affordable housing crisis" in the city and supported the city's efforts to allow laneway housing.

"There are many things that we can do to enhance the affordability of housing," she said. "One of them is on the income side. That's why I support a living wage."

Wilson also backed an idea to use inclusionary zoning to force developers to build affordable housing units.

She also backs a licensing system "for the tenant and for the wellbeing of the community."

Jason Allen said in the short-term, the city should increase enforcement of unscrupulous landlords to address "bad rental situations."

Sharon Cole also supported establishing a licensing system to make absentee landlords compliant under the bylaws.

"Absentee landlords are cramming students into unsafe conditions," she said. "We need to address it immediately."

Linda Narducci, in answer to a question about establishing safe injection sites, personally didn't like the idea, but she would support it if the community wanted the sites. People will continue to use needles so it would be better for them to do it in a safe environment with medical people nearby, she said.

"I'm putting my personal thinking aside," she said.

Geffros was all for the safe injection sites. After watching five of her friends die due to drugs, she said Hamilton's drug crisis is "not concentrated in some mythical, scary place in the north end. It is everywhere. It's in Westdale, Ainslie Wood, Kirkendall, Strathcona. People are going to inject drugs so our job is to make sure they don't die."

Richard Massie agreed safe injection sites is an issue for the entire city.

"It's better than a back alley," he said.

The only dust up during the nearly hour-long debate was when Massie questioned Geffros about supporting the provincial NDP which endorsed, he said, higher deficits during the recent Ontario election.

"How can Ward 1 (residents) afford to elect someone who supports what appears to be zero fiscal (policy)?"

Geffros countered that in her platform the two largest capital programs are transit funding and odour abatement to improve the environment where residents live near industries.

Geffros, who has worked as an NDP youth co-ordinator, accused Massie of attacking not her platform but "me as an individual. That's interesting."

Also participating in the televised debate was Syed Bakht and Jordan Geertsma. Absent from the event was Sharon Anderson and Ela Eroglu.

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