

ACCESSIBILITY CRUCIAL TO BEING MAYOR: BONNETTE

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president of the student council at Acton District High School.

So Bonnette took the plunge and put his name forward. When the votes were tallied up on election night, he finished just one vote behind the front-running incumbent to earn one of the three seats.

"You get caught up in this euphoria. I'm a councillor. I got elected. Everybody likes me," Bonnette said. "Then one month into the job, I had this guy screaming at me. Called me every name in the book. I got a quick reality check."

It was a valuable introduction to public service for Bonnette, who will end his four-decade run on council — with the last 19 years spent as mayor — later this month. During that time, the issues facing the town grew increasingly complex, from whether or not to approve a chip truck to planning for a provincially mandated growth of 27,000 people and instituting policies to fight climate change.

When Bonnette was

elected mayor in 2003, he became the town's first mayor from Acton.

Former Halton Hills councillor Pam Sheldon once told Bonnette that "a mayor is like a tea bag. You don't know how strong it is until it's in hot water."

Bonnette did not have to wait long to test that theory. Soon after the election, William Osler Health System announced it was closing the obstetrics and pediatrics departments at Georgetown Hospital.

Bonnette met with former Health Minister George Smitherman and garnered support from union leaders. Postcard and coupon campaigns were launched and a rally was staged at Queen's Park. In the end, the decision was reversed and Bonnette later lobbied to have Georgetown's hospital join Halton Healthcare.

"It was quite a spectacular moment to see Acton and Georgetown and everybody galvanized for one common cause, to save our hospital," he said.

Bonnette wasn't shy about standing up for his community. When the U.S. introduced the American



Graham Paine/Metroland

Rick Bonnette describes himself as a consensus builder when it came to serving as mayor.

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Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) in 2009, impacting local companies' ability to sell products in the U.S., Bonnette, after consulting with council, drafted a resolution that Halton Hills would not buy from countries discriminating against Canada.

That drew international

attention and gained momentum nationally, with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities following Halton Hills' lead.

The U.S. eventually granted Canada an exemption from the policy.

"It got resolved and I never thought in my wildest dreams that Halton Hills would be the epi-

centre," Bonnette said.

The 2013 ice storm saw the community rally again after power was knocked out in 95 per cent of the town three days before Christmas. People made turkey dinners, having street barbecues to help those without power. "Our hydro workers were so dedicated," Bonnette said about the crews working through their holidays.

The ice storm also was responsible for launching the mayor's Twitter account to help keep people informed.

No matter how strongly Bonnette felt about an issue, he felt it was important to involve council members to get a variety of opinions. He considers himself a consensus builder.

"I'm not one of these people that says you have to have like-minded people. I hate that," he said. "If you're all thinking the same, you might not be thinking what 80 per cent of the people are thinking."

Bonnette also made a habit of having lunch at the food court in the Georgetown Market Place every few weeks to make himself accessible.

"People would come up to me and ask 'Are you the mayor? Can I talk to you about something?'" he said. "Some people might not think they can come here (town hall)."

Bonnette also took pride in answering his own emails from residents, even if they didn't

always like the answer.

Bonnette said there were many highlights over the years:

- fast-tracking servicing to the Premier Gateway by 10 years;
- stopping two highways through Halton Hills by proving the 401 could be widened;
- using gas tax money to resurface 90 per cent of the town's gravel roads;
- building more than 30 kilometres of walking trails and adding bike lanes;
- building three ice pads, two fire halls, two libraries and three skate parks;
- hiring full-time firefighters to provide 24-7 fire coverage;
- restoring GO train service to Acton while pushing for all-day service on the Georgetown line;
- becoming one of the first municipalities in Ontario to have a green plan.

While he won't miss the phone calls after a snowstorm — "It's treacherous (for plow drivers), people don't understand how difficult of a job it is" to clear 1,100 kilometres of roads — Bonnette said he will miss playing a part in helping make the town a great place to live.

"I'll miss helping people. Problem-solving where I can. I love to advocate. I love the challenges," Bonnette said. "I'll miss my colleagues and the staff, and meeting so many different people in town at events. We have a great community spirit."

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