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Upsets and retirement bring four new faces to regional council, including one from Markham

BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

One arrives because of retirement, another two thanks to upsets and a fourth where youth and enthusiasm won out over experience.

But for Bill O'Donnell, Brenda Hogg, Jeff Holec and Jamie Young, the foursome represent the new faces at York Region council, all awarded an opportunity to deliver fresh ideas and cast key decisions over the next three years.

Their first order of business will be electing a new regional chairperson at the region's inaugural meeting Dec. 14.

"I have some experience with a good number of councillors and that's good because, if not, I would probably have some kind of nervous arrest," said Holec, who upended incumbent Rob Grossi to become Georgina's mayor.

O'Donnell replaces Ralph Aselin as the fourth Markham regional councillor after Aselin did not seek re-election, while Hogg upended Janet Mabley for one of two regional seats in Richmond Hill.

And Young, a two-term local councillor in East Gwillimbury, downed Mayor Jim Mortson for the town's top position.

A communication consultant, Holec's résumé includes contract work with both the town of Markham and Richmond Hill on planning issues, as well as 17 years with members of the provincial government.

"Issues of rapid growth and amalgamation in Georgina are already here. My goal will be to try and explain to people in central and southern York Region that Port Bolster does not have a hell of a lot in common with Woodbridge," Holec said.

"People in Georgina don't like the idea of amalgamation and regional council and the province has to be aware of that. Just look at a map, Georgina is hanging outside of York Region. Our boundaries are closer to Durham Region."

Bolstered to the forefront in Richmond Hill for her stance against development on the Oak Ridges Moraine, Hogg insists her rookie status on regional council does not cast her at a disadvantage with her colleagues.

"I'm not exactly a newcomer," Hogg said, who is chairperson of the Ontario caucus of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, an organization that deals with municipal-based concerns across the country.

"I'm just a late bloomer. I'm not just a local councillor, I will get involved in the bigger issues."

But the newcomers are faced with a decisive learning curve — despite their past political experience — stressed regional chairperson Bill Fisch.

Markham's Bill O'Donnell

Richmond Hill's Brenda Hogg

"The new members of council don't fully appreciate the services the region is providing," he said. "Following an orientation session, they will begin to spend more time with the issues.

"They will quickly learn this job will consume much more time than they ever imagined. I learned that on my first day. Historically, there's generally a 20 to 30-per-cent turnover each term and good, new ideas are always welcome.

"You never want to see your colleagues not make it but that's the nature of the beast."

Meanwhile, Young is wary of conflicts of interest that arise at both the municipal and regional level, a problem that plagued his predecessor throughout his final term of office.

Mortson is appealing a judge's decision that he return to court to face new conflict-of-interest charges in connection with properties he works as a tenant farmer.

He was found guilty last year of not declaring a conflict of interest in his votes at East Gwillimbury and York Region council in connection with his own farm and the extension of Hwy. 404.

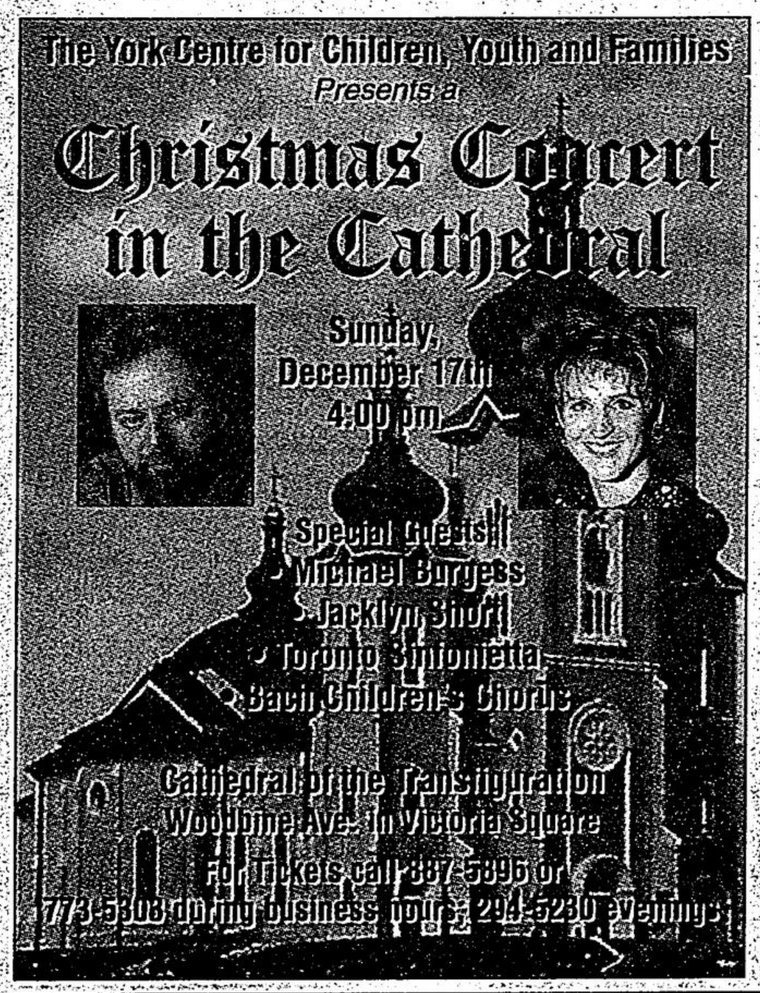
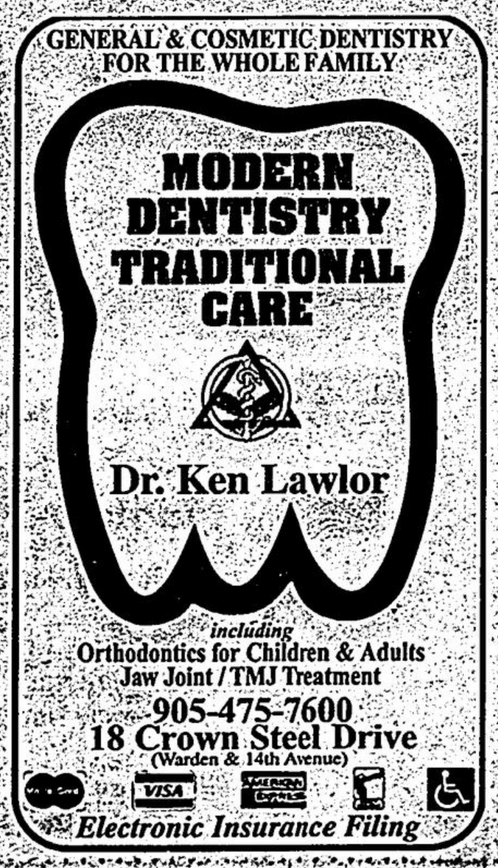
He has consistently refused to comment on the case and Young questioned Mortson's stance during the election. But Young said he's not faced with a similar plight, despite his stepfather owning a large farm in Holland Landing.

Because only the mayor represents East Gwillimbury at regional council, Young plans to lobby the region to allow the town's deputy mayor to represent him if a future conflict does arise.

And O'Donnell, a former Ward 1 councillor representing Thornhill and the west end of Markham, said he sought out a regional position because he wants to be part of the pending discussions regarding amalgamation.

"When York Region was formed in 1971, serious damage was done to people because boundary lines were arbitrarily drawn," O'Donnell recalled. "I don't want to divide communities again.

"Local issues are becoming regional issues and, more and more, the decisions are handed over to the region.

"But the region's planning level must change, we have to start seriously influencing the way municipalities are growing.

"Rural municipalities are leapfrogging over each other just to attract development and the urban environment has to be contained."