Council watchdogs keep politicians on toes

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

People ask Paul De Buono what's in it for him.

Rumours fly he runs his watchdogging website, Vaughan Watch, on behalf of a former city employee, a city councillor or a bidder who lost out on a city project.

"None of it's true," says Mr. De Buono, a 35-year-old family lawyer who wants Vaughan residents to talk more about human rights, poverty and what he sees as a lack of openness at city hall.

He formed the citizens group in January. In September, he put up its website, www.vaughanwatch.ca, where a new area for posting opinions, Open Session, is promised in January. Its first topic: Vaughan's bylaw to prevent group homes.

"If Vaughan Watch existed in Toronto, it wouldn't be a big deal," Mr. De Buono says.

Stirring things up the Vaughan Watch way will be welcomed by some in a region where municipal elections attracted low voter turnout and produced councils that look more harmonious (read: duller) than before.

Markham Councillor Erin Shapero, an unabashed environmentalist whose views caused a stir when she was elected three years ago at age 25, returned by acclamation this fall.

She had hopes some council incumbents would be defeated, but the challengers, including her friend Valerie Burke in Thornhill, all lost.

"I thought people would choose change," says Ms Shapero, critical of council veterans she argues are dependent on election campaigns run with cash from developers and consultants.

"How can you look to these people to solve the problems when they're the ones who helped make it that way?" she asks. "A politician may say that they're listening, but who are they really listening to?"

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Other people Ms Shapero considers "open to new ideas" are gone from councils in the region, former Newmarket regional councillor Diane Humeniuk being one.

She was defeated, as was Whitchurch-Stouffville councillor Mark Carroll, who will continue to work locally in the environmental field. "I hope to be able to still shake the tree a little bit," he says.

Tired of fighting, Aurora councillor Evelina MacEachern decided not to run again, but in some of her last meetings helped block attempts by other council members to exempt town lands on the Oak Ridges Moraine from protection. That battle isn't over, Ms MacEachern warns.

Over, however, is the standoff between King Township Mayor Margaret Black and "green" councillors opposing the York-Durham sewer system, or Big Pipe to King City.

Sewer opponents lost their majority to sewer supporters, a result that depresses Jane Underhill, a former councillor back for the anti-pipe side. King City residents may somehow be able to fight on, she says.

"I can still see avenues that can be explored."

In Georgina, citizens in Save the Maskinonge and other groups are becoming more vocal on town initiatives such as the Keswick Secondary Plan.

Mr. De Buono once ran unsuccessfully for a school trustee seat in Toronto, but doesn't think he'll run for office again.

"If my aspiration was politics, all my discussion would be complements, or there would be a lot more."

Certainly, some would like to see Vaughan Watch carry more "positive" information.

"It is very sad that you feel it necessary to continue to be so negative — it is unfortunate you are so unhappy with Vaughan," says a posting by a Woodbridge resident Mr. De Buono identifies as Rita Z.

Mr. De Buono says he's not a negative person ("People describe me as quite pleasant"), but he is gathering names for a petition calling for a "real" review of tendering practices used to award building contracts for the city's new civic centre.

Rudy Giuliani, New York City's mayor-turned-icon after the 9/11 terror attack, and Toronto Mayor David Miller are held up as examples of true leadership on Vaughan Watch.

The implication is Michael Di Biase, Vaughan's mayor, doesn't look good by comparison.

"To me, greater leadership can be shown by tackling problems head on, instead of saying they don't exist," Mr. De Buono explains.

Big Pipe opponent Jane Underhill

Paul De Buono of Vaughan Watch

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