

Mayor reflects on past; planning for future

BY PEP PHILPOTT

With the exception of a one-term hiatus between 2003 and 2006, Wayne Emmerson, 60, has occupied the mayor's chair since 1994. But now he's calling it quits, saying he has no intention to run in this autumn's municipal race.

Over those 16 years in political office, six as councillor of Ward 4 and nine as mayor come the end of 2014, Mr. Emmerson has witnessed first-hand and tried to manage Whitchurch-Stouffville's transformation from small town to third-fastest growing municipality in Canada.

As the number of residents around him grew, Mr. Emmerson's personal inner circle shrunk, due to decisions he made that he thought were best for the municipality, not friendship.

Traditionally the new year is as much about musing on the past as it is celebrating the future. Last week, the Sun-Tribune sat down with Mr. Emmerson and asked him to reflect on his years in leadership of Whitchurch-Stouffville before he tackles a new challenge. In 2014, he hopes to become chairperson of York Region.



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Mayor Emmerson (left) with Blair Purcell and Bob the Belgian horse.

Sun-Tribune: Take us back to your first mayoral victory. You are 41 and are now the leader of your home town. Describe the Wayne Emmerson of 1994.

Wayne Emmerson: It was very exciting, I have to tell you. I knew roughly what the job was like when I was a councillor. But it was different. There was a lot more involved in being the mayor.

ST: Were you excited? Nervous?

WE: A bit of both. I said to my wife: "we're into it now". But I was really looking forward to it. I was really wanting to make a difference in my community. But I was nervous, too.

ST: How has the Wayne Emmerson of today changed since 1994?

WE: Well, I think I've got a lot of experience. I think I've got a lot more patience. I don't jump too quickly now. I think things out. But I think I'm really the same person. I haven't changed that much.

ST: What was your original motivation in municipal politics?

WE: When I first started I really wanted to make a difference. We were falling behind in recreational facilities.

ties. We only had a couple of baseball diamonds and we only had one arena. We were losing out and there wasn't much for the youth to do. I grew up in that. So I thought it was time that I wanted to get involved.

ST: How has your motivation changed over the years?

WE: Oh, I don't think it has changed. I want to provide facilities in the municipality that people would say: "It's great to live here. We have a great community, we have everything we want". We still have needs. We don't have everything. But we still have a good community to live in.

ST: How has the responsibility of being mayor changed you over the years?

WE: I don't think it's changed me. I think I'm the same. I'm more excited when I see the fruits, see what we've accomplished. I'm very pleased, very gratified by that. What we've accomplished is what I felt we needed to get into. But I don't think it's changed me.

ST: How has the role of leadership over the years

transformed you?

WE: It's made me stronger. I think my leadership skills have got stronger. I'm more of a negotiator. I try to negotiate things out so that we can come to some kind of a consensus. You can't just say, "No." You've got to give solutions, you've gotta give them something. You gotta work things out. If you can negotiate and be the leader of the community then you can do great things.

ST: What character traits have developed in you from your role as mayor?

WE: Patience I guess. People say government moves so slow. But I think there's a reason. We are representing the public and you really want to make sure that you don't move too quickly. You make sure you cover all your bases because there's someone out there who is probably smarter than I am and will think there is a better idea. So you just have to wait it out a bit. If you move too quickly that's when we get ourselves into deeper trouble. If you shoot from the hip too quickly, boy, you can cause yourself a lot of trouble.

ST: Are there traits in addition to patience that have formed?

WE: I guess I'm understanding with people. I understand their concerns. I understand their issues.

ST: Are there personal scars from your role?

WE: I lost a good friend of mine that I grew up with because I couldn't help him [with what he wanted]. Some people, ya, they won't talk to me because I didn't put a stop sign up or something. But I have gained multiple friends. When I take my wife shopping she'll get it done and I'll still be in the first aisle. People just want to talk.

But we have lost people who were our friends before we got into politics because I think they felt that I could do differently for them. I couldn't.

ST: How has your vision for the town changed over the years?

WE: I'd love to have more jobs and more employment lands, more businesses coming to town. I'd love to see a hotel. I'd love to see a convention centre. I'd like to see some rental apartments for some people who can't afford a home. I'd like to see our transit used a lot more.

ST: Some people say growth has created two solitudes: the old and the new Stouffville. Do you have any of these concerns?

WE: No, I'm not concerned about it because I feel the new people are connected. They are. They're connected from the soccer, to the hockey, to the baseball, to the dance, to the school. When I go to a hockey game they'll come and talk to me.

The town is a young community now, which is very exciting for me to see. It's very gratifying to me. It is going to be the future for our town.

ST: Thinking back over your years as mayor, what are you most proud of? What's your legacy?

WE: I really don't have a legacy. I've planned fire halls and I've planned arenas. We've done parks, we've rebuilt roads. It's all a legacy. The whole town and what we've accomplished is all my legacy.

ST: What are your regrets?

WE: I spent a lot of time with the community. I think I didn't spend as much time with my family. I think they took a second step back. That is one of my regrets. My family and friends are very important to me.

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