

10 Questions with Mayor Jim Abernethy

Clarington's top politician grapples with complex issues in first year in office

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By Tim Kelly

Just over nine months ago, political neophyte Jim Abernethy took office as Clarington's mayor. It's been a steep learning curve for the local businessman who has had to grapple with the highly contentious energy from waste issue while learning the ropes at the local and regional levels. He answers our 10 questions about his first year in office.

What has been the biggest challenge about sitting in the mayor's chair?

I expected that learning the municipal process would be my first challenge, and it was. In that regard, our municipal staff were very patient and helpful. My learning curve was steep and, as time goes by, I am becoming more comfortable with my new role as mayor.

Has your first year as mayor gone like you expected it would?

Yes, and I would like to again thank all those who supported my effort to become their mayor. It has been a very exciting and worthwhile experience for both me and my wife, Cathy.

What is the biggest issue facing Clarington and why?

Managing our growth in such a way that it does not consume us. Growth should be able to be absorbed into our community -- it should not absorb our community. Time has shown us that "growth does not pay for growth" and the community at large ultimately pays the price. For example, consider the frequent increases to property taxes that we have experienced over the last six years. Growth should be environmentally sustainable and fiscally sound.

Do you believe enough study has been done on energy from waste?

No, the studies are not yet complete.

Are you confident that an energy from waste facility will be safe?

It is premature to comment on this question since all of the studies are not complete. Safety has always been my No. 1 concern regarding any energy from waste facility.

Do you feel there are other options to incineration to get rid of garbage that can't be composted or recycled ?

It is important for everyone to know the history of this very important issue. In 1999, the Clarington and Regional councils of the day both passed bylaws which prohibit any new landfill sites within our borders. In 2000, Durham Region developed a Long Term Waste Management

Strategy that included an aggressive waste diversion and recycling program in addition to considering an Energy From Waste (EFW) type facility to dispose of the balance of our residual waste. Today we should all be extremely proud that in less than seven years we have exceeded our original goal of 50 per cent diversion and recycling, and now have our sights on a new goal of 70 per cent by the year 2011. This would be a remarkable achievement, but it is doable. Our population is expected to grow. Some say it will almost double by 2035. The fact is that 30-40 per cent of our garbage cannot be recycled. So what do we do with it? Energy From Waste was isolated years ago for consideration as part of a long-term strategy. We are now investigating that possibility.

Do you feel Clarington is treated well by the Region ?

Clarington is the Region. Clarington is one of eight Local municipalities that make up the Regional team. The Region is responsible for providing services not provided by the local municipalities. These Regionwide services include: public transportation, water and sewer, roads, health inspection and residential waste management (garbage pickup).

What is the best thing about being mayor? The worst?

I have experienced only good things about being mayor. Every day I am meeting new people, most of whom are volunteers. I am amazed at their positive attitude and level of genuine enthusiasm. Many times I have said that Clarington is a gem. We should all take a moment to reflect on what a wonderful community we truly have.

How have you been treated by your constituents ?

I am a believer in treating people the way that you expect them to treat you. My role as mayor is to represent all of the people... to listen to what they have to say and to give everyone a fair and equal opportunity to be heard.

What plans do you have to increase commerce and industry in Clarington?

The extensive residential growth that we have experienced in the past decade has widened the gap between our Industrial/Commercial versus Residential tax bases. Presently, 90 per cent of our property tax revenues are generated from the residential tax base. Council and staff have isolated this as a growing concern and are making plans to close the gap. One new initiative to try and close this gap is the recently formed "Green Community Advisory Committee." This committee is a think tank for community leaders to work together to develop a community strategy that promotes more sustainable development practices. It will also provide input to the sustainable development component of the Municipality's Official Plan Review.