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Transit, density dominate City of North Vancouver mayor debate

Jeremy Shepherd / North Shore News

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A crowd eagerly listens to the three mayoral contenders George Pringle, Darrell Mussatto and Kerry Morris at Centennial Theatre. Photo Cindy Goodman, North Shore News

Mayor Darrell Mussatto and challengers Kerry Morris and George Pringle traded barbs and bon mots in a debate that veered from a waterfront ferris wheel to the city's burgeoning skunk population before a spirited Centennial Theatre crowd Sunday.

The three politicians vying to lead the City of North Vancouver over the next four years unanimously supported preserving public spaces at shuttered schools Cloverley and the Lucas Centre, but Morris stood alone in suggesting the city buy the lands.

"I think if the school district is going to be short-sighted and sell their lands, then the City of North Vancouver should acquire them," he said. "I look at these properties as a public asset that will be needed sometime down the road, and to reacquire those lands at excessive retail prices will never happen."

That purchase would deplete city funds and result in a significant tax hike, according to Mussatto.

"We don't need to spend tens of millions of dollars," Mussatto said. "There'd be nothing for anyone else, anywhere else."

The city can keep the fields while working with the school board and the community to explore options for the properties. Those options could include low-density housing, he said amid a smattering of boos.

Pringle was critical of Morris' answer.

"Mr. Morris has said, 'I will vote.. .' He doesn't get a vote," Pringle said. "The school board will come to council with a proposal and they have to vote on what the school board sends them. They don't get to create something else."

Buying the properties would be worthwhile, reiterated Morris. "Let's take that property into the city, even if we have to spend some money. Let's not buy a ferris wheel, let's not build an ice rink outside at sea level," he said, before being drowned out by applause.

The debate was hosted by the Cloverley and Courthouses Area residents associations, as well as North Van City Voices, a citizens group that has frequently called for limiting density.

The city's waterfront has room for a ferris wheel, according to Pringle, whose assertion drew boos and groans from many in the crowd.

"I think that lit-up ferris wheel will shine to Vancouver, and Vancouver people will be coming over here," he said. "We should be taking their money as much as we can."

Pringle and Mussatto championed an outdoor skating rink on the waterfront.

For Mussatto, the waterfront should be a gathering place amidst high-density development with a hub similar to the Robson Square Ice Rink.

"Without a doubt, I think the success of the Friday Night Markets is a glimpse of the future," he said.

The city needs to give developers less leverage when negotiating community benefits, according to Pringle.

Developments that are larger than what is allowed under the official community plan often include extras like daycare provided by developers, forcing councillors who disagree with the project to also vote against daycare.

"We don't want the developers, during the public hearing, to look like they're blackmailing council," Pringle said.

Any money paid to the city for extra density should go into a separate fund, according to Pringle.

The city has prospered through its density bonus policy, according to Mussatto.

"Look at our library. That library was density bonused in," he said. "We wouldn't have the Kiwanis units at 15th and St. Andrews. We wouldn't have the Legion tower building. That was all density bonusing: six floors of non-market rental housing for seniors."

The current application of the density bonus policy results in developers getting whatever they want, according to Morris.

"It has been almost a way to thwart the OCP," he said.

If elected, Morris said he would publicly disclose the Lonsdale Energy Corp.'s financial information.

"We expanded ourselves into \$12.5-million worth of debt without coming before council even and asking for the authority to borrow that money," he said. "I'd like to know how the mayor justified deviating from the policies where we let short-term accounts payable become term loans, left unpaid, for five years."

As a competitor with companies like Fortis, LEC is obligated to maintain customer confidentiality, according to Mussatto.

"We disclose as much as we can legally. .. but we are bound by our relationship with our customers."

Mussatto touted LEC as one of the cheapest and highest quality sources of space and water heating in the province.

"Lonsdale Energy Corporation is owned by you," he said.

Pringle advocated turning LEC into a city department to allow public access to the company's information.

"Although you all own it, only the city itself is a shareholder," he said.

On the subject of affordable housing, Pringle suggested the city's influence was limited.

"I don't think the city can affect a whole market in the Lower Mainland and suddenly change the rules of supply and demand," he said. "We don't have affordable housing here because we live in a better place. I could move back to Windsor (Ont.) right now if I wanted to live for \$620, but I want to live in a place where I won't slip in the sidewalk in front of me."

Mussatto pointed to the units leased to single mothers by Hollyburn Family Services. Those units are made possible by working with developers and property owners, he explained.

"We'll give them a bit more floor space area so that we get some non-market rental housing."

The city's stock of affordable housing is depleted as three-storey walkups are demolished to make way for smaller, much more expensive units, according to Morris.

"We're working at crosspurposes to affordability," he said.

While Mussatto urged support for an upcoming referendum on public transit, Morris proposed a different attitude in dealing with TransLink. "Let's have the mayor of North Vancouver go to TransLink, kick a little butt, and get us some buses."

On the subject of foraging critters, Morris favoured a cull and relocation program for skunks and raccoons while Mussatto suggested eliminating the problem by reducing food sources and managing waste more judiciously.

Pringle proposed a different solution. "I'd like to see, rather than just a culling, a mass shipment of skunks to West Vancouver," he said, drawing laughs from the crowd.

Next city all-candidates debate is Nov. 4, 11:30-1 p.m. at Capilano University's CS U Library Lounge. The election is Nov. 15.

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