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MV candidates duke it out

By Harold Eastman, Special to This Week

It was perhaps appropriate that the all-candidates meeting for Madawaska Valley took place in a hockey arena.
Municipal politics is Canada's other rock'em-sock'em sport, and the cheerful rumble of the crowd packed into a room at the Paul Yakabuski Community Centre last Saturday afternoon made it clear that folks were up for a little action. No real bloodshed, but maybe a little scrapping in the corners and a few good hits along the boards.
Did the fans come away satisfied? Read on.
After a meet and greet with the candidates, retired Presbyterian minister Bob Hill, blew the opening whistle. The candidates trooped to their chairs on a set of risers. The challengers ? Elser Lee Faith Archer, Ted Bialy, Andrey Kaminski, Shelley Maika, Ernie Peplinski, and Mark Willmer for councilor, and Kim Love for mayor ? radiated a certain cocky confidence.
The incumbents ? Mayor David Shulist and councillors Bob Kulas, Linda Neuman and Carl Bromwich ? looked more wary. This was a hometown crowd, but the incumbents were clearly a little more nervous about what might get thrown onto the ice.
The event ? sponsored by the Valley Gazette ? began with opening statements.
Each speaker was limited to two minutes, ruthlessly enforced by the Rev. Hill with a stern tone and a cow bell.
To no one's great surprise, all the contenders agreed on the need for more transparency and better services, with lower taxes and less waste.
Then it was on to the questions. The first, posed by the organizers, asked how candidates would improve core services.
Again, each spoke for two minutes. And their answers sketched out the issues before the municipality: the rising costs of policing, the need to implement a long term planning document from 2010, the state of the municipality's water system, and the need to bring more transparency to council and involve more citizens in decision-making.
There was plenty of good stick-handling and passing, but after nearly an hour no one had scored and the gloves hadn't come off even once. The candidates were ragging the puck and the crowd was getting restless.
Someone in the cheap seats suggested that the game would go faster if replies were kept to 30 seconds, and the rest of the crowd roared their approval. Sure enough, a question about making Council more open finally broke things open.
Passionate calls for fewer closed meetings of Council, the abolition of Committee of the Whole, and more citizen input set off bursts of enthusiastic applause.
Then, a question about water ? and a little more action in the corners. The water system in Barry's Bay is losing up to 25 per cent through ?leakage.?
Some of that loss may be due to residents and businesses bypassing water meters.
Lusty applause and a few shouts greeted the suggestion that offenders be named and punished.
All of the challengers promised tougher enforcement ? if not quite public shaming ? prompting more vocal expressions of approval.
The water issue also touched a deeper nerve. Rural residents with wells don't feel they should be liable for the woes of the Barry's Bay system, an echo of resentments left over from the era of township amalgamations 15 years ago.
Finally, as the meeting stretched into overtime, came the big one. The municipal budget is up 30 per cent this year. What would the candidates do to control spending?
Some in the room might have been expecting verbal fisticuffs about a council purchase of land that also put taxpayers on the hook for a costly environmental cleanup.
But Mayor Shulist dodged a political body check by apologizing contritely. There was a bit of a stunned pause, and some murmuring. But no boos or jeers.
And from that moment, it was just a question of running out the clock. The crowd applauded politely as the candidates made their points, but people were eyeing the exits. In minutes, it was over.
So was the meeting the high-scoring bone-cruncher some might have hoped for?
Probably not. But to this reporter it embodied the best of the political game as Canadians play it. Ragged. Loose. Full of heart. And with the kind of respectful conduct that would have made all the candidates worthy of the Lady Byng trophy.
Certainly, the crowd seemed content.
The mood was buoyant as people made their way out to the parking lot.
And why not? When politics is played this way, we all win.