

South Algonquin's new Mayor-elect shares vision for upcoming term



By Nate Smelle

Since Ontario's municipal elections on Oct. 24, Bancroft This Week has connected with several newly elected politicians throughout the newspaper's distribution area. Last week South Algonquin's Mayor-elect Ethel LaValley took time to speak with Bancroft This Week about her priorities and vision for the township over the next four years.

Humbled and excited by the outcome of the election, LaValley is eager to get started serving the community she loves. With more than two decades of experience in municipal politics, and an equally impressive résumé as a leader in Ontario's labour movement, LaValley brings a wealth of knowledge, political wisdom, and practical leadership skills to the council table. First elected to council in Airy Township in 1974,

LaValley became a leading voice in the push for amalgamation of the townships which eventually united to become the Township of South Algonquin. Following amalgamation, she was then elected as the new township's first Reeve in 1985.

"I have spent 24 years in municipal politics, and it's a lot of fun," LaValley told Bancroft This Week. "It's a full-time job with part-time pay, but I love it! You don't run for the money, you run because you are passionate about your community."

Although some of the other candidates running in the past election campaigned on the promise to do away with the township's Ward system, LaValley said she has no plans to change the system, noting that "It is working well, so why try to fix it?"

During the campaign, LaValley said the one issue on the top of almost everyone's list was housing. Acknowledging that she already thoroughly understands the complexities of the housing issue in South Algonquin, she plans to immediately get to work expanding the township's capacity to welcome more people, including permanent and seasonal residents.

"This is a top priority," said LaValley. "We need multi-unit housing here. There are some seniors who would like to have a home; and there are other seniors who would like to be able to go into a senior citizens apartment; and there are all of the other groups who just can't find a place to rent. Our young people can't come home because there is no place to live, no place to rent, no place to buy. So, it's not just the seniors, or those in the middle, or the young people, it has affected the whole spectrum."

One of the reasons LaValley has the lack of housing as her number one priority is the negative impact it has on the local economy. She said the fact that it is so difficult to find a place to live in South Algonquin restricts economic growth, because it prevents people from moving to the township for work.

"People can't come here to work, because there is no place to stay," explained LaValley. "Things are at a standstill. We had a situation here where they didn't have enough people working at the restaurant. The restaurant closed at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and only open until 6 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. Another restaurant was closed Mondays and Tuesdays all summer because they couldn't get staff. It's embarrassing to be honest. Here we are with all these people coming to our flagship park - Algonquin - and when they come through Whitney they might not be able to grab something to eat. It's a big problem. And all the roads lead back to housing when you look at what the problem is here."

Indicating that she intends to tackle the issue immediately, LaValley said her first job as mayor will be to put together an ad hoc committee on housing. LaValley said another of her personal goals as mayor is to improve communications throughout the township. In order to accomplish this, she intends to foster a more transparent relationship with constituents and the local media.

As an Elder and member of the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan First Nation, LaValley's roots, along with her understanding of the local community and culture run deep. Having accomplished so much throughout her political career and during her time as a leader with the Ontario Federation of Labour, she hopes to inspire other Indigenous people to follow their dreams.

"I am an Indigenous person, and I was born and raised with a lot of racism in this community," LaValley said. "But, guess what, we can rise above it, and we can put our efforts into positive thinking. We need some allies for sure, but we can do it!"

While speaking on Indigenous issues at a labour conference nearly 20 years ago, LaValley recalls noticing a young woman in the crowd crying softly as she spoke. Approaching her after she finished speaking, LaValley asked the woman if she was alright, and if she had said anything to upset her. LaValley said the woman then told her that listening to her speak about her life experience as a fellow Indigenous person made her feel like she was somebody for the first time.

"That was almost 20 years ago and I still remember it," LaValley said. "From an Indigenous point of view, it's our time now. It's our time and we have to work very, very hard to say yes it is our time and we are going to do something about it. There are so many things I want to do in this township, but I also want to bring an awareness of some of these issues. I have four years to do it and we have a really good council coming in, with so many important skills. I am looking forward to working with everyone."