

DTS BIA Mayoral Candidate Responses

These questions were emailed to all councillor and mayoral candidates. The responses are presented in the order that they were received.

1. Parking is an ongoing concern in the downtown core, from not enough, to unauthorized parking in private lots, accessibility and employees and residents parking beyond the posted time limits. Do you support parking infrastructure developments within the downtown? What about other creative solutions to these concerns that are aligned with the City's active transportation and environmental goals?

Martin Ritsma

I am in support of the development of parking garage(s) and facilities in the downtown core. I have been in some beautiful facilities, primarily in the Netherlands, in Europe where space is very limited in their Cities' core. Visitors and residents, alike, love to park where they shop, dine and entertain. I believe that the Erie Street parking lot has so much to offer. This is a prime location for a parking garage with parking both below and above ground. The other location that needs to be part of our parking solution is the former Grand Trunk Railway shops. Particularly, the Brownfield area at the site can be a location for parking that starts at ground level and can go up to ensure a high density of auto parking. In addition, as in the Netherlands, we need to provide indoor parking for bicycles that is safe and dry. Certainly, parking garages can be so much more than just car parking!

Robert Ritz

Yes, I support parking infrastructure developments within the downtown. In fact I presented an idea to the current Planning and Heritage Sub-committee of Council two years ago with a proposal to develop the Erie Street parking lot with:

five levels of underground parking

a five storey residential/commercial building on top that occupied the west side of the lot extending from the north entrance to the south entrances of the lot.

surface parking between the new building and the Wellington Street stores

providing a net increase of 287 parking spaces

no cost to the city as it was self financed as the property tax generated from the building above along with fees at current rates financed the cost of the garage

surplus property tax revenue generated from the site could be used to finance other downtown projects such as the Public Art Plan.

one parking level for the buildings use, other four parking levels could be a combination of public hourly parking or parking spaces sold or rented to adjacent businesses and landlords for residential or commercial parking for tenants or staff.

Kathy Vassilakos

While I support parking infrastructure in the downtown, I think we need to be more strategic about where additional parking is created, what kind of parking is created, and how it is managed. I am in favour of a tiered pricing system that creates turnover in the highest value parking spots and gives people low or no cost options to park further away from storefronts. Foot traffic drives a lot of retail sales and anything we can do to encourage a more pedestrian friendly downtown will improve the shopping experience for visitors and residents alike. Making it easier for people to walk, cycle, or take public transit to downtown should be a goal both from a business and from an environmental perspective. A tiered parking structure

on the periphery of the downtown core with green features (solar, green roof, etc) coupled with an attractive and simple wayfinding strategy that makes the pedestrian experience from the parking to the core pleasant should be the goal. More crosswalks, bump outs, lighting, even public art along the path will promote a sense of place and reduce the perceived inconvenience of a short walk from the parking to the shops. As always, we should be aware of the barriers that people face and so reserving close parking for those with mobility challenges is key.

2. Excessive noise, speed and congestion from vehicles on our downtown streets negatively impacts the enjoyment and safety of our BIA. What do you think can be done to change this?

Martin Ritsma

As in question number one, we need to encourage the use of public transit to our downtown. Make it a family outing to take the bus downtown and spend a morning or afternoon. Once again, walking and cycling to the downtown should be what we do more regularly.

The greater presence of our Police Force would be very helpful. The regular assignment of Police Officers to the downtown core. The old fashioned 'walking the beat' could be revisited. Officers on foot or on bicycle in the core would decrease much unwanted activities and noise. We need to increase the number of crosswalks in our downtown. This would enhance pedestrian safety and serve as a traffic calming measure. This would also encourage more people to walk in the City core.

Robert Ritz

Lower the speed limit in the heritage area to 30 kph. Remind drivers of the reduced speed limit using signage [similar to attached PDF 2337]. Create more pedestrian crossings where the tactile markers are located and identify crossings, not with overhead flashing lights, but with flood lights and signage [similar to the attached PDF 2337].

Kathy Vassilakos

I have contacted the Ministry of Transportation about the truck traffic through the downtown and they have flat out refused to consider requiring truck traffic to use the bypass. Having provincial highways run through the core will continue to be a challenge, however there are things we can do to reduce noise and speeding. The downtown traffic study identified pedestrian improvements that will help with safety and will also slow traffic down. Increased enforcement and reducing the speed limit should help but we also need to create a built environment that slows cars down – bollards, bump outs etc. I also think that adding parking to the periphery (for example the GTR site) and encouraging walking will reduce congestion, especially if we create better wayfinding.

3. The DTS BIA is currently working with consultants on a comprehensive Downtown Stratford Public Art Plan. How can the city support and implement the recommendations and goals of this plan and foster public art opportunities in the BIA?

Martin Ritsma

We need to continue to maintain a sizeable grant source of funding for BIA and other organizations' activities. I have been proud to be part of the staff and Council committee that receives, reviews and awards grant dollars to many projects. Once complete, we need to accept, embrace and promote the Municipal Cultural Plan. Upon the completion of work by STEPS Public Art, Council needs to address how it can support its findings and recommendations. As a Municipality we need to advocate on behalf of

our "Arts" community for grants from both the Provincial and Federal governments. Looking ahead to the implementation of the Municipal Accommodation Tax, perhaps a portion of these funds could be utilized to support the Downtown Stratford Public Art Plan. Finally, I would love to see a time where art from local artists is on full display in our downtown shops and businesses. The Market Square needs to be used more regularly for our amazing 'arts' scene. I would love to have erected, two large poles where lights and a drop down canvas can offer visibility and shelter for Market Square activities. I have photos of such a design from Franeker, the Netherlands that I would love to share.

Robert Ritz

I have been involved in the Public Art Plan with the consultants and their work shop and the tour. I fully support the public art initiative. I spoke to this at a debate with the concern of how the art is maintained over time as it fades and is either refurbished or painted over. Part of the Plan should determine how funds are raised to finance such a project. I fully support sponsorship by businesses that want to support this campaign with appropriate signage of recognition where the public art they financed is displayed. The plan should also note the benefits to the property tax payer so they know what their return on investment would be should funds generated by property taxes be used finance a portion of the cost of this project.

Kathy Vassilakos

The city should celebrate public art and be open to co-funding public art projects with the DTS BIA. Arts grants often require support from the local government (financial contributions and letters of support) and the city should be ready and willing to participate in grant applications. The DTS BIA plan should be featured in the city's Municipal Culture Plan and should inform public art throughout the city.

4. In February 2020, the City of Stratford declared a Climate Emergency. Do you agree that we are in the midst of a Climate Emergency? If so, how do you plan to support green initiatives and environmental projects and how would your partner with the DTS BIA to implement them in the downtown core?

Martin Ritsma

We are absolutely in the middle of a Climate Emergency! This is the greatest global issue impacting mankind and all things that inhabit our environment. We need to continue to have designated staff whose sole responsibility is to promote sound environmental activity and to ensure that this work moves forward and gets done. A monthly presentation and report should be part of our Council procedures to keep our commitments and progress front and center. To support this environmental work there needs to be a budget line in the yearly City budget. In addition, we need to establish a long time (10 year plan) budget to support this work.

We need to encourage GREEN industries to set up in Stratford and to be part of our economic growth and future. Specifically for the downtown core, we need to reduce the number of single person car visits to the core. Once again, individuals need to be encouraged to use public transit, walk or bicycle. Furthermore, there are lots of opportunities for businesses in the downtown core to install solar panels. Part of the staff responsibility should be to partner with Infrastructure and Development Services, Corporate Services and Festival Hydro to assist in the installation process. This work should be financially incentivized.

Robert Ritz

I recognize that climate change is having an impact on Stratford. Our summers are longer and hotter, and our weather is getting more severe. Stratford has an emission reduction plan, but we should be doing

more to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. And we should lead by example so citizens and developers can follow.

As Mayor, I would propose:

Accelerating and improving our Greenhouse Gas Reduction Plan through initiatives such as:
Decarbonizing the city's and Festival Hydro's vehicle fleet by replacing old gas-powered vehicles with electric, hybrid, green hydrogen or other low-emission technology.

Better, more flexible and more sustainable public transit.

We can also build more housing downtown and increase its density, which will encourage walking and biking and reduce vehicle usage.

Strengthen heritage preservation and the reduction of carbon emissions by reducing the amount of building demolition. Instead, we should work harder to preserve our older and significant buildings by repurposing them.

The city must do more to engage and involve citizens, civic groups and groups such as the BIA who are ready to get actively involved in making Stratford a more sustainable community. This means better communications to citizens, more engagement and consultation and, where possible, incentivize citizens to reduce their own carbon emissions and live a more sustainable lifestyle.

Kathy Vassilakos

Yes, we are in the midst of a climate emergency. The city can and should help with financial incentives for green initiatives. Moreover, the city should reduce any barriers to these initiatives that may exist in our municipal policies. Creating a culture of yes to new ideas should be the norm. The new Climate Change Manager will be an important part of how we interact with the DTS BIA as both organizations explore new ways of addressing climate change.

5. In light of recent events in our city and broader response to our growing awareness of the imperative to care for all in our community and beyond, we all need to reflect on the role we play, and the actions needed to be part of a city that is more inclusive in both action and words in relationship with Stratford's BIPOC and LGBTQ+2S community. How will you support our and our city's commitment to improving the relationship with Black, Indigenous, People of Colour and LGBTQ+2S community members?

Martin Ritsma

Just this week I signed my online pledge to our local PRIDE community. This summer I was blessed to represent our Mayor and Council for the ribbon cutting of the permanent PRIDE location on the second floor in the Downie Street block. I was also the Mayoral representative to kick off our PRIDE parade. This work is certainly not new to me. As an educator and as a school principal, I initiated the PRIDE flag to be flown at our school and was instrumental in the annual Colour Run that the entire school participated in every year. I was so impressed with the beautiful rainbow crosswalk that was installed with private dollars. However, I was disappointed in how quickly it deteriorated. In speaking with Kelly Ballantyne at SIRKEL, I have shared that I would love to be part of the next installation of the rainbow crosswalk. It is heartwarming to see so many local residents and visitors take the time to acknowledge this important inclusive symbol with photos and selfies.

Robert Ritz

As Mayor I will actively encourage and support equality and diversity in Stratford and at City Hall.

Kathy Vassilakos

The city needs to take a systems approach to improving relationships and to reducing barriers that exist – for our employees, for residents & visitors, and for business people. We need to listen to community members with an aim to address barriers and challenges that they identify.

We should lead by example and recognize that this leadership cannot end with things like words, flag raising, or with speeches at events (although these are important expressions of our support). The real work, that takes our actions from being performative to being meaningful, is in the everyday. Things like reviewing applications for business licenses, permits etc., to ensure that they do not pose barriers to businesses, expanded food choices at city events so that everyone feels welcome (the small things matter), looking for outdated language in policies that is harmful. We also need to take a zero-tolerance approach to racist and anti-LGBTQ+2S incidents that occur both within our organization and in the broader community. The city has hired a Manager of Diversity, Equity, and Indigenous Initiatives and it is my expectation that their work will drive the change needed within the organization and also within our community, including the business community.

6. BIAs are local Advisory Boards that provide expertise and experience to City Council that contribute to the development of policies, programs and initiatives that improve and impact businesses and property owners in downtown Stratford. How could relationships and partnerships between the BIA and the municipality be enhanced?

Martin Ritsma

The input of the BIA is absolutely valued. We have a vibrant downtown, largely because of the work of the BIA and the commitment of our downtown business owners. I would certainly continue the naming of a City Councillor to sit on the BIA Board. This Council representative becomes an important conduit of information and concerns from the BIA to Council. As Mayor, I would make it my pledge to attend BIA meetings and be available for open communication. I have a great relationship with many of our downtown businesses. I love our downtown, it is where myself and my wife do almost all of our shopping and dining.

Robert Ritz

We must make sure that citizens trust Council and the decisions it makes. We need to value citizen engagement. We need to listen to the knowledge, expertise, opinions and sentiments of our citizens. Some of our City's best ideas came from citizens, and not Council: Our amazing park system, keeping the CPR railway away from the river, preserving our unique city hall building and creating the Stratford Festival. Council has missed opportunities to make this City work better for its citizens. Too often, the answer is "no" and there is no flexibility and no new thinking in finding new solutions to address the challenges we face. It's time to change the culture at City Hall. I will be more respectful of citizens and more focused on working together and building trust between city government and citizens. I care deeply about this city. I know we can do better. You deserve to have a Mayor and a Council you can trust.

As Mayor, I would propose:

Go to the people: Work harder and smarter to engage citizens, such as going to where citizens are to get their opinions on ideas, proposals and solutions, instead of making them come to a meeting or filling out a survey. We need to do much more than the minimum level of consultation — both the Mayor and Council and city staff.

Mandatory public engagement by the City on significant issues or proposals, including enacting rules and standards for meaningful public engagement.

Dedicated public engagement coordinator on City Staff.

Use best practices from other cities on transparency, accountability, public communications and public engagement.

Improving the City's website and other means of communicating with citizens and making it easier for citizens to find the information they are looking for and to provide their opinions on issues.

Communicating frequently with citizens, in plain and simple language – not using legal, planning, financial and other language.

Making information about city and Council business easy to find and easy to understand, and empowering Councillors to better communicate with citizens.

Improving the level of service citizens should expect from the city and providing more flexibility and ease when it comes to doing business with the city.

Revisit the City and Council's committees to make them more focused on our challenges and to take advantage of citizen expertise, experience and commitment to their city.

Kathy Vassilakos

I think there is room for better communications between city staff and DTS BIA staff however it is quite difficult for me, as a councillor, to know exactly how that communication could be improved. I know that there have been times when the DTS BIA was brought into a discussion later than ideal and I feel as though ongoing and less formal conversations and interactions between staff could flag these earlier. The DTS BIA budget is brought to Council on an annual basis and the minutes from the meetings are included in the Finance and Labour Relations agenda packages. DTS BIA board members do attend Council to address specific issues. These are all fine, however there may be room for some additional feedback from the DTS BIA that is more forward looking and strategic and not so much reacting to current items. I think Council would benefit from a periodic report from the DTS BIA that is more high level. For example:

- trends that business owners are seeing or hearing about
- challenges that are unique/new that may need to be addressed in the near to mid future
- feedback from new businesses because what worked 5 years ago may not work now

We would like to thank all the candidates for taking the time to respond to these questions so we could share their responses with the Downtown Stratford BIA members!