

2021 Political Candidates' Forum - Submitted Questions

Answers supplied by Tom Zariski, Council Candidate

Mayor/Councillor Questions:

Q1. Businesses report growing concerns with costs of electricity and natural gas, and municipal franchise fees on utility services have been identified as a cost barrier levied on businesses by municipalities – how would you approach this issue?

The problem is the transmission costs. The Town of Drumheller is an ATCO client. ATCO has some of the highest transmission costs in the province. ATCO argues that their costs are higher because they serve mostly rural clients so there are less customers per kilometer. Town Council has lobbied the provincial government to spread out the transmission costs over all the province like the province of Saskatchewan does. I will continue the lobbying efforts initiated by Council to make the transmission costs spread out over the province like they do in other provinces.

Q2. Without using the words transparency, honest communication or speaking on behalf of the community, what is your primary responsibility as a member of Town Council?

A councillor makes decisions for the residents. It is the responsibility of a councillor to make sure that all decisions are based on accurate, comprehensive and current information. If a councillor feels that he or she does not have enough information to make a good decision, then it is their responsibility to direct administration to gather more/better information.

Q3. The frequency that Town Council goes 'in-camera' during meetings seems to have increased in recent years. Some might say this contributes to mistrust of Council. Do you believe that council goes in-camera during meetings too frequently?

The Town of Drumheller is in the unique situation of working on the Flood Mitigation Project. The FMP deals extensively with land issues. When dealing with land issues council must go in camera. Every council meeting has an update on the FMP so very frequently council has to go in camera.

Q4. What is more important for our Town right now: building new homes and commercial space or rehabbing/expanding/better utilizing our existing homes and storefronts?

I feel that both are equally important. "Housing Starts" are a frequently used economic indicator because building a house and occupying it contributes so much to the local economy. Because of the downturn in the oil and gas sector we do have a fair number of commercial/industrial properties available and some very good deals. An example is the Trican property that was purchased by the Town for its Public Works Shop. The property was valued at \$6 million, and the Town purchased it for less than \$2 million.

Q5. What qualifies you to be mayor/councillor? Please reference education, experience, business acumen, inter-personal skills, or any other aspect you believe has prepared you to be mayor/councillor.

Certainly, being on Town Council for 11 years is my main advantage. I am experienced in the budget process, strategic planning and working with other orders of government.

I was Principal of DCHS for many years. I was responsible for 600 student's education, over 40 staff, a budget of \$2.5 million and all of the strategic planning involved.

I have a Master's Degree in Education Administration from the University of Calgary.

I feel that one of my best traits is that I am able to come up with innovative solutions to difficult problems.

I regularly meet with residents of the town to discuss their issues. I attend many community association meetings.

Mayor & Council Questions:

Q1. Do you think our downtown core and tourism corridor are healthy and successful? If yes, why? If no, what would you do to change that?

Council has gone a long way to revitalize the downtown and the tourist corridor.

The Downtown Revitalization Project although just beginning has already decreased the vacancy rates in the downtown.

The "Tourism Corridor Bylaw" initiated by Council has given the Town the necessary leverage to improve some of the bordering properties that are very visible and that are not well maintained.

One area that Council needs to continue working on is "Brown Fields" along the Tourism Corridor. Brown Fields are lots that are contaminated and cannot be built on in their current state. Council has begun to improve some of these sites by partnering with the owners.

Q2. If Council received a \$1 million grant to use for town infrastructure any way you wanted, what would you do with it and why?

The new Supported Living Level 4 construction which I have lobbied for for ten years received \$7 million from the provincial government. This money will be used for construction only. Drumheller and District Seniors Foundation will be responsible for providing the necessary furniture and equipment. As the SL4 is a high level of care the furniture and equipment has to be "hospital level" so is very expensive. We estimate the cost to be close to \$1 million.

Q3. Looking back on Drumheller's response to COVID during the beginning of the pandemic, do you feel that Council spent taxpayer dollars wisely? In other words, do you think it was wise to have spent so much on items like road closure signs, overtime and meals for staff, and spraying sidewalks and fence posts with soap?

When Council was presented with the initial information about COVID by the provincial government, Alberta Health Services, World Health Organization and Center for Disease Control. It was suggested that it could sweep through the valley like the Fort McMurray wildfire swept through their town. We were told that we needed to do everything that we could to prevent it getting into Drumheller. Council acted on that information by setting up an Emergency Operations Center which implemented many anti-COVID measures. The measures were very effective as the town was one of the very few places in all of Alberta that didn't have any COVID cases for many months.

In retrospect there were some measures which probably weren't needed and in future pandemics might be eliminated.

Q4. A few years ago there was talk of a youth center in town, and a gala was held to raise funds for it. Are you in favour of bringing a youth centre back to the table, and what is your overall vision for the youth of Drumheller?

I am in favor of an “effective” youth center. Unfortunately, I have seen many examples of ineffective youth centers. This to me is the key. We need to make sure that if we spend tax dollars on this that it is well used, well supervised and effective.

There is the potential for more things to do for youth in Drumheller. A number of years ago Don Robertson, Jason Blanc and I founded the Drumheller Community Football Association – Titans Football Program. This program has given many young people in the Drumheller area the opportunity to participate in a recreational, competitive and life lesson activity.

I think that there are more opportunities that could be implemented for youth in Drumheller such as a boxing club, archery club, disc golf, cooking, etc. by better utilizing the expertise and facilities we have in the town.

Q5. 3 years ago Town Council issued a survey about implementing a curb-side recycling program. Public response was in support of the idea (even with a user fee) yet Council did not implement the program. What are your thoughts on a curb-side recycling program?

Council has looked at this possibility and felt that although certainly a good idea it was not cost effective. Recycling is great and everyone I know recycles a fair amount of materials that don’t end up in our landfill. Curbside recycling would make it easier for residents to recycle their material.

The problem involves the cost of implementing this in Drumheller would be millions of dollars which would have to be distributed amongst taxpayers raising everyone’s taxes.

Q6. What are your thoughts on the COVID-19 Restriction Exemption Program being implemented at the arena, pool, and Badlands Community Facility? Some communities have opted out; is the Restrictions Exemption Program something you support or oppose for town-owned recreation facilities?

We live in a very strange world where the old rules don’t seem to apply. We are in a crisis situation in Drumheller and Alberta because of COVID spread. Vaccinations have dramatically and effectively helped people avoid hospitalization when infected with COVID. Unfortunately, some people don’t feel the need to get vaccinated. We need to do everything we can to promote and encourage more people to get vaccinated. The REP helps convince people that they need to get vaccinated.

Q7. How will you gain the public’s trust in the Town moving forward with flood mitigation?

Council realized that the Flood Mitigation program was not going in the direction that was intended so it restructured the program. The current director and direction will be communicated to residents of the valley. We need to go forward and not look back. The FMP is essential for Drumheller valley growth.

Q8. Air B & B’s have become very popular and there is a huge risk regarding the long term impact on the local rental market, available affordable housing, and community safety.

What’s your plan to manage and oversee development of Air B & B’s or other short term rentals?

Like many old town bylaws the current “Tourism Residence Bylaw” did not foresee the invention of Air B&B’s. It requires Tourism Residences to comply with licensing, safety, and health standards, etc. The bylaw needs to be revamped to take into consideration Air B&B’s.

There is a lack of affordable accommodation in Drumheller and Air B&B’s contribute to this. The revamped bylaw might have to limit the number of Air B&B’s and or make it more stringent to obtain a necessary license, or no Air B&B’s in certain areas, etc.

Q9. As Council you will be required to make decisions on complex topics, with lots of info and viewpoints. Someone will always be disappointed. What are the key factors you consider when making decisions that will guide the Town’s future?

A Councillor is responsible for making decisions based on all the available information. A Councillor needs to make sure that the information is comprehensive, accurate, timely and comparable to other jurisdictions. When a Councillor feels that he or she does not have enough information then it is their responsibility to delay the decision and to send it back to administration to gather more information.

I feel that one of my best traits is that I am able to come up with unique solutions to difficult problems.

Q10. What do you see as the role of tourism in the future success of Drumheller and why?

The Drumheller Valley is the third most popular tourist destination in Alberta. We welcome hundreds of thousands of tourists each year. Tourists spend money and every dollar that a tourist spends in the valley goes around and around helping the economy. Drumheller needs to try and spread the tourist season out more into the shoulder seasons. Tourism will help local business survive during the months when they are not very busy. This will allow more business to be available for local residents year round.

Q11. Our Chamber network’s research shows that members of the public have high levels of confidence in the business community to help move our province forward – what is your plan to engage business leaders in growing prosperity in our community?

The current council’s Economic Development Task Force led by the newly hired town Economic Development Coordinator is certainly a step in the right direction. The town needs to continue to listen to the Chamber and its members about economic development ideas.

Q12. Do you have any plans for seniors? From the Sunshine Lodge residents.

I have worked for ten years lobbying, meeting with 3 different governments and 4 different Ministers to develop the Supportive Living Level 4 Residence, something that has been needed in the area for many years. It is the process of being built.

The Drumheller and District Seniors Foundation (of which I am the Chairman) has also initiated a lodge renovation and expansion. We will be demolishing the old 500 wing and building a new wing with much larger more modern suites.

Q13. What is your vision for the Rotary Spray park and surrounding area, including the Aquaplex?

The Flood Mitigation Project will have an effect on this area, so any expansion or redesign needs to be coordinated. I would like to see and have lobbied for a new fountain wading pool. I have asked that it be put on Council’s long term capital budget.

One of the things I am working on is when the new dyke is built in this area I would like to see if it would be possible to build it up a bit higher and shape it so that it would create an amphitheater. When we have events like the Pow Wow people sit on the dyke to watch. Why not build it up a bit higher and shape it so that it could accommodate many more people?

Q14. If elected, what are your top 3 priorities in your first few months on council?

1. I feel that it will be necessary to restore confidence in the Mayor and Council. There seems to be people that seem to think that council has some hidden agenda. The mayor and council are committed to improving the Drumheller community in every way possible. People need to appreciate that they work hard and long in doing this.
2. Senior's housing needs to be a priority. 100 people in Alberta turn 65 years of age every day. We are an aging population and need to have the necessary accommodations for all care levels and economic levels of seniors.
3. Economic Development needs to be a priority. Residents are concerned about taxation. We need to spread the cost of town services out amongst more businesses and residents.

Q15. If the Province doesn't mandate, are you in favour of mandating vaccines for Municipal Employees? Yes or no.

The Town has the responsibility of providing a safe working environment for its employees. If workers have to work in fairly close proximity with each other creating a high chance of virus spread, then the town needs to make sure that everyone is safe. Having everyone vaccinated would go along way to make the environment safer.

Q16. Do you have any plans to expand the existing dog park? The current size is not much larger than a residential back yard.

Dog Parks are certainly on the agenda of council. The current parks were a step in the right direction and to a certain extent test cases to see if they worked. We will need to develop more dog parks in more locations of different sizes.

Q17. Citizens often expect municipal politicians to address issues under the jurisdiction of the others such as the provincial or federal government. How will you focus on municipal issues and determine when to advocate to other levels of government?

Over the years I have met with many Ministers of various orders of government to lobby for Drumheller. Also, the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association regularly asks for municipal issues to lobby the provincial government and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities lobbies the federal government. Town Council has proposed issues that are brought forward by these organizations.

Q18. What type of homework have you done to prepare for being a member of Town Council?

A Councillor needs to be familiar with the Municipal Government Act which governs what a municipality can and cannot do. I am very familiar with this document. I am a trained and certified Assessment Review Board member. Our training involves extensive knowledge of the Assessment and Taxation sections of the MGA.

A Councillor needs to be familiar with Town Bylaws. I have helped initiate many Bylaw rewrites.

I regularly meet with and talk to the people of Drumheller to hear what they have to say about what they need and want from the town.

Q19. If elected, what do you think your first 90 days looks like?

If elected I think one of my main tasks will be to help mentor the new councillors to help bring them up to speed on the many facets of being a Councillor.

We then begin the Strategic Planning and Budgeting processes.

Strategic Planning and Budgeting involves identifying what needs to be done in the valley determining the priorities and then determining how much money we have available to accomplish these things. Unfortunately, there is never enough money to do everything.

Q20. How have you already been volunteering or serving in the town, and have you had any experience sitting on other boards?

I am President of the Newcastle Community Association

I Chair the Drumheller and District Senior's Foundation

I Chair the Town of Drumheller Municipal Planning Commission

I am the President of the Alberta Golf Association Foundation

I am on the Golf Canada Rules and Amateur Status Committee for Canada

I have been: Vice President Drumheller Minor Hockey Association, Chair of the Royal Tyrrell Museum Cooperating Society, President of Drumheller Community Football Association, Board member of the Citizen's Advisory Committee to the R.C.M.P. for over 20 years, President of the Alberta Golf Association, Drumheller Library Board member.

Q21. Given that our summers are getting hotter and drier, and we live in a semi-arid landscape, what town activities/initiatives will you implement to combat anthropogenic climate change?

I believe that the town needs to begin a "Drought Mitigation" initiative. Floods last for about a week a drought could last for years.

Personally, I have done a lot of xeriscaping on my property. Over the last few years, I have reduced the amount of grass in my yard by about 70% and converted it into a very low maintenance, low watering landscape.

One of the things I would like to begin when elected is do a study on the possibility of using effluent water to water flowers and plants. The town pumps thousand of liters of effluent water back into the river each day. This water is basically the same as river water. An example might be; could we initiate a system where we fill up people's rain barrels with it?

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to answer these questions.

Tom Zariski