

Georgian Bay Vote 2010
List of Questions



Responses by Bruce Hanson, 2010 candidate for Ward 3 (Baxter) Area Councillor

1. General

- What is the main reason (or reasons) for your wanting to be on Council?
I am concerned about the process of financial management within the Township. I want to represent constituents in regards to how our tax dollars are spent.
I also want to become more involved in the community. This is a way I can do that while making a positive contribution.

- Based on your direct experience on Council (or observations of Council for those of you who have not served on Council) what do you feel have been the major successes over the past term of Council and what have been the shortcomings?
I have not been on council, nor have I observed council meeting during this term. (I attended a couple of council meetings during the previous term.)
My views are:
Successes: My observation is that the general business of the community continues to run.
Shortcomings:
Values: A breakdown of respect and trust between the municipal government and the general public.
Financial transparency: the reported refusal of the council/municipality to release certain information on public spending is disturbing.
Awarding of Contracts: This has been an area of concern. To my knowledge a complete and detailed response from the municipality has not been provided. An example is the awarding of a contract to a councillor and not requiring a bond while reportedly issuing approximately 50% of the payment up front
conflict of Interest: Proven, alleged, and perceived conflict of interest within the council.
Commitment to master plans and building restrictions: I have heard this concern voiced by several people. I have seen decisions made by this and the previous council that did not support or enforce building restriction on title.
Taxes paid vs. services received: This is an issue raised by many taxpayers. I don't believe council has adequately handled this issue, or alternatively, has adequately communicated reasons for decisions to taxpayers.
Responsiveness: I have left messages with the municipality that have not been responded to.

- How do you think Council and the Township should be run to overcome these shortcomings?
There is not a single answer. Possible actions are covered by the remaining questions.

- How do you propose to represent all of the constituencies in the area for which you seek office (ie the whole Township for Mayor; the whole Ward for Councillors)?
By being available and open minded, and trying to best assess the position of the majority of constituents.

2. Administration

- What roll should Council as a whole, the Mayor, or individual Councillors play in the supervision of the Township's employees? To what degree do you think they should be involved in the hiring or releasing of staff?
As I have not been on council, nor am I an employee of the municipality, I don't have any knowledge at this point on what current processes are in place. I would need to research: 1) what restrictions or guidance exists in municipal acts and statutes; and, 2) what the best practices are, as used in other municipalities.

My current belief is that municipal workers need to be able to execute their roles independent of political interference. Accountability for getting the job done should lie within the management structure of the municipality itself. Someone - presumably the lead bureaucrat(s) who holds responsibility for the staff - is then accountable to the council for the ultimate work outcomes of the municipal staff.

- How would you safeguard against possible abuse of public trust by members of Council or staff?

I would start with a municipal Code of Conduct (if not already in place), followed with mandatory training for councillors and staff. Councillors and staff should be required to review and sign-off on the code annually to keep it alive and in the forefront of thought. Non-compliance would be grounds for discipline and possible dismissal. Staff's job descriptions and performance reviews would include references to the Code of Conduct. There must be documented processes in place to handle alleged and confirmed breaches.

- What do you see as the optimal level of staffing for the Township? (be specific)

I'm not qualified to make an assessment of optimal staffing at this time.

- The past year or two have seen many incidents of poor decision-making by staff and various committees. Inquiries made by the public go unanswered, and a general malaise has invaded the township staff's attitudes. The customer service delivered by the Township staff, which exists to serve its public, is at an all-time low. What, if elected, will you do to correct these problems?

This is a classic case of looking for a solution before defining the problem and understanding the root cause. It often results in "solutions" without expected results. Poor customer service, low morale and other related performance issues are often symptoms of a root cause problem, and not necessarily the problem itself. One successful process to approach this type of situation is:

- 1) Define the problem
- 2) Collect and analyze facts and data in order to get to the root cause
- 3) Generate and consider a variety of solutions
- 4) Select a solution to implement
- 5) Track and monitor

In this regard, the above statement identifies several "problems".

- 1) Poor decision making by Staff.
 - a. Questions regarding this item may include: How many poor decisions? What are some examples? Is it pervasive through all staff or certain departments? Is this a general decision making problem, or specific to certain skill sets, like financial analysis? Is it due to a moral problem? If so what's at the root of that "problem"?
- 2) Poor decision making by Committees.
- 3) Unanswered public inquiries? (This may be the same "problem" causing point 5 below)
 - a. Customer service skills, morale, or overwork are just a few of the possible problems that may cause this symptom
- 4) The staff's attitude is that of general malaise.
 - a. Lack of teambuilding skills, poor management and leadership practices are possible causes but not the only possibilities
- 5) The customer service delivered by staff is at an all-time low.
 - a. Again, this is often a symptom of a deeper problem

As such, there may be one common, or five unique problems, that need to be addressed. Suggesting, and implementing, a final solution, without doing the proper groundwork, is not recommended.

What, if elected, will you do to correct these problems?

Since the staff will presumably not report to me, my actions would have to be indirect ones. I can suggest and support efforts to identify and remedy the real problem(s). I can be part of a committee to help sort out the many problems listed, and decide which are primary and which are dependent problems.

One possible initial step to take, once an owner(s) of the problem(s) is selected, is to run a confidential "climate" survey of all staff and councilors to get an unbiased assessment of the state of affairs. That is, get a perspective from the inside looking out, rather than basing our solutions solely on all of us standing outside and looking in.

3. Township finances

- Immediate past practice of Council was to invest tax surpluses in infrastructure projects. Do you agree with this practice? If not, how would you handle future tax surpluses?

I don't have enough experience or data to offer an opinion at this time. These are areas I will learn more about as I gain experience.

My general approach would be to list the possible options and prioritize them against the annual and five year goals for the municipality. If there aren't annual and five year goals/priorities, that speaks volumes.

- The annual budget is of interest to taxpayers. How would you ensure more public understanding of and input to the budget?

Most people want to trust their representatives to do the right thing on their behalf. They don't have the time to follow up and ensure things are going right themselves, or even to provide input. This attitude on the part of the majority of residents leaves an environment that is ripe for mistrust, suspicion between parties, and some times ripe for financial abuse, if not managed correctly. I believe that making financial information readily available to the public is one way that these negative outcomes can be reduced. Those who wish to get actively involved have the information to do so, and those that don't, have the comfort knowing that some residents are taking the time to do so.

Full and detailed budget documentation: including the proposed budget with comparisons to at least the previous years approved and actual results, needs to be readily available to all who seek it. The web site is the most obviously choice, with hard copy available at the municipal office, or at the post offices in the three major towns of MacTier, Port Severn and Honey Harbour.

I would support and push for this type of financial visibility and accountability.

4. Planning

- Community plans that reflect the specific characteristics of each community are important to taxpayers. The current Manager of the Planning Department has apparently questioned the 'relevance' of community plans in this township. How would you protect the integrity of existing and future community plans?

To paraphrase Louis Carol's Cheshire Cat: If you don't know where you are going, then any road will take you there.

If you don't have a plan, you really don't know where you are going. (If you have a plan but don't want to share it, then you don't want *any one else* to know where you are going – or alternatively, you don't want them to know where you are leading them.)

To protect the integrity of existing and future plans, I would view them as very strong guidelines when it comes to voting on requested adjustments and amendments. If you aren't going to follow a plan, then don't have one. At the same time, one must recognize that there are always some situations that justify changes, particularly when the spirit of the plan can be better achieved in other ways.

(The next question is a perfect example why community plans are required. Please see that response as well.)

- As a potential member of the Committee of Adjustment, please describe your ideas on the rights of the individual property owner, and the rights of the community as a whole to protect their community 'for the greater good'. How will you handle a situation where the two sets of rights are diametrically opposed?

This is a perfect example of why community plans are required and need to be followed. In my thinking, community plans should reflect the ideas of the majority of the constituents of the applicable areas. These then become very strong guidelines of to be followed by individuals in the community. I said very strong guidelines, not absolute. There needs to be a process to allow for unique situations. That is what I understand the adjustments process to be for. Of course, everyone considers their situation as unique which is why there needs to be consistency in decisions. Without justifiable consistency, again, you effectively don't have a plan.

If the municipality and its leadership does not have or want a plan or a vision of what the municipality is to look like, or stand for, in the future, then we shouldn't bother with plans because no one will have the courage or commitment to stand by them. I would view this as very unfortunate, and a detriment to our community as a whole.

- What is your understanding of the zoning category called "Open Space"? How does it differ from Residential zoning, and what is allowed to be constructed on Open Space property and what is not allowed?

I do not have the experience or knowledge required to comment on this.

- Many permanent residents in this township are looking for economic development, ways to bring additional year-round residents and businesses into the area. Growth and development are seen as positive and beneficial. In contrast, many seasonal residents view themselves as stewards of a very unique natural area and believe that overdevelopment has the potential to destroy it. How do you see balancing the planning needs of the permanent communities with those of seasonal/recreation communities?

I don't accept that this is a matter of "seasonal" vs. "permanent residents".

More and more people are retiring or choosing to live year-round on our water front properties. Many of these permanent residents, I believe, are concerned about water quality and our natural resources. I don't accept that ALL permanent residents, or even just those in our towns, don't give a hoot about water quality and natural resources.

Certainly, there are people on both sides of this debate and they will cover the full spectrum of opinion. I've had the privilege of talking to people from both extremes – and the cases I am thinking of are both examples of "permanent residents". Let's not use this, or other topics, as an issue to divide us. We need to work as a community to find common ground and mend wounds as opposed to creating more.

Back to the challenge, and it is a real challenge, but I don't believe as the question implies that the goals are mutually exclusive.

Part of the challenge lies in the previous discussion about individual rights vs. society's rights.

I bring two other perspectives forward for consideration:

1) Sometimes old wisdom is valuable: do we want to "cut off our nose to spite our face"? There is an interesting balance at work here.

What are the largest industries in the township? I suspect that one of the largest is tourism – including our "seasonal" residents. What brings people here? It's, to a large degree, our lakes, our forests, and our wildlife. Then, why would anyone want to destroy them? I've even met a few permanent residents who like to snowmobile, use ATV's and hunt and fish. Possibly we have some basis for common ground on which to move forward after all.

I would put to you that the statement made in the above question "that overdevelopment has the potential to destroy it [i.e. natural area]" is correct. Do we want to destroy our natural resources? Don't think it can happen through overdevelopment, or mismanagement of our resources? Then look east at the cod fisheries; look west at the salmon fisheries? Do we want to "cut off our nose to spite our face?"

2) Vision: This takes us back to planning, but at a higher level. What is the "vision" we, and our leaders, hold for the future? Is it a backwoods settlement where we all live in log cabins with out-houses in every yard. I don't think so. Is it a financially thriving northern version of Florida with drained wetlands, concrete shoreline lagoons, manicured lawns, and sprawling strip malls? Personally, I hope not, but maybe it is. Or is it a raw natural setting with abundant wildlife that brings in business and development, and is balanced with centers of modern, healthy, in-land and shoreline communities - communities of individuals with a respect for what has created their viability, and brought them here in the first place.

I know I would find it easier to buy into the latter vision over the first two. But, this really isn't about me. What is your Vision? What is "our" Vision? We need a council that is willing to create a vision based on the community; a council that inspires the community to buy into it; and a council that leads the community forward. Heady words. The question is: "Do we have it in us, or do we follow the path we've always taken. After all, if we have no destination in mind, no plans we're committed to follow... any road will get us there. It's a lot easier that way.

- Boat access only properties are dependent on marinas. What would you do to ensure ongoing marina access for these taxpayers?

I do not have the knowledge required to offer constructive suggestions at this time.

- Our Township is blessed with considerable forests and wetlands that are home to a large number of endangered species. What actions do you think the Township should take to protect these forests and wetlands and the species therein?

I believe the Township should take concrete steps (no irony or pun intended – well, maybe just a little) to protect our forests and wetlands. As previously stated, first we need an agreed upon vision of where we want to go. From there we can put goals and objectives in place, and from there,

take specific steps such as bylaws, community plans, parks, maybe protected areas, public programs (possibly something like “adopt a species”), and balance it with a plans for business and economic growth.

- Other rural Townships use their web site to post notice of all proposed amendments to the Township's Official Plan and provide mailed notice to all neighbouring property owners within 1 kilometre of the subject property. Do you believe that this approach should be adopted by our Township? Please explain why you would or wouldn't support this.

I support this. I believe this is a great approach. The web site is a good location for general access.

In addition, property owners within some distance, such as 1 km, should also receive mailed notices for the following reasons:

- a) They are the ones most likely to be directly impacted by the proposed changes;
- b) They should receive proactive notification; and,
- c) Not everyone in rural areas has access to the Internet or e-mail.

5. Water quality

- Water quality is of paramount importance to waterfront property owners. How would you ensure the protection of the water assets in the Township?

With only one vote in a democratic process, I cannot “ensure” anything. I would support cost effective initiatives to protect our water quality. The first step is to measure and track water quality. In many areas this has already started. There may need to be more of this done, be it Township, District, or standardized, volunteer water testing. On the protection side, mandatory or random septic inspections should be continued or re-instated. On-going education and reminders may be a further option. I'm open to other suggestions.

6. Emergency response

- For non road access property owners how would you help them with emergency response?

This is a topic that I have not considered and have no current opinion on. I would need to receive more input from the residents and also understand what other communities are doing in order to look for best practices.

7. Council performance

- The current Council is perceived by many to be dysfunctional and not entirely transparent in their activities. What do you propose to do to change this perception?

I propose that:

- a) a third party conduct a forensic audit to identify concerns about mismanagement of funds. Then I would push for corrective actions, if required. This is needed to clear the air, end suspicions and start rebuilding trust. Without this step, there won't be closure;
- b) financial decision-making is brought back into council. I say this based on limited knowledge, but an understanding that some decisions are now being made independent of council debate or votes. Any back room dealing creates the perception of wrong-doing and builds resentment and distrust within the community;
- c) in the future, there is always full public disclosure as to how our money is being spent. Past refusals to release financial information in regards to the spending of taxpayers' money is unacceptable. It creates a perception, real or otherwise, of conflict of interest, and builds a wall of distrust between the municipal government and taxpayers. The previous discussion on budgets, in #3, also applies; and,
- d) a Code of Conduct be created (if one does not already exist), and that all staff and councillors be required to review and sign-off on the code annually. See the response to Question #2.

- Do you think that using public advisory committees would be helpful? If so, which areas should these committees should focus on and how would you structure these committees?

I suspect that public advisory committees would be very helpful. I don't have an opinion at this time on how best to structure them or where they would focus.

- In the past the COA was comprised of citizens who would meet to review applications for minor variances. Do you believe a COA consisting of selected members of the public can effectively manage the challenges faced within the Township and if so would you support such a change?

I do not know what the reasons for discontinuing this practice were. If they were valid, I do not know if they still apply today.

- Would you consider allowing a period of up to say 15 minutes before each Council meeting for the tax payers to have access to Council as a whole, without the formality of a deputation?

I do not have the experience to offer an opinion at this time.

- Should our Township Council consider hosting an annual meeting, in the summer time, of the "Executive" of various organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, Community associations and Cottagers' associations, to hear first hand their ideas or concerns?

This is an excellent idea to help improve communication and gather valuable input.

8. Garbage

- What do you propose to do to ensure convenient access to garbage and recycling bins for those taxpayers who don't have curb side pickup?

I have lots of questions, but unfortunately no answers at this time. I need to become more familiar with the problem, and how extensive it is. I do believe that core services like garbage and waste removal are fundamental responsibilities of the municipality. That people on roads, or those coming to marinas from water access locations, don't have either option, is unacceptable.