

WHITBY MAYORAL CANDIDATES CLASH OVER TAXES, GROWTH AND HOSPITAL

WHITBY — Taxes, housing, infrastructure, investment and the long-awaited Whitby hospital dominated a packed mayoral debate Thursday night as Whitby's three candidates made their case to residents ahead of the October 26 municipal election.

Regional Councillor Chris Leahy, incumbent Mayor Elizabeth Roy and candidate Harshini Rajmohan took part in the September 24 Whitby Chamber of Commerce forum at the Abilities Centre.

An independent report from the event described affordability, property taxes, housing, infrastructure and Whitby's relationship with senior governments as the major themes of the evening. The Chamber emphasized that it does not endorse candidates and said its objective was to give residents and members of the business community an opportunity to hear directly from those seeking the mayor's office.

For Leahy, the evening also marked another stage in his campaign.

Following the debate, Leahy said he was proud to wear one of his campaign buttons publicly for the first time and announced another production run as a campaign fundraiser, citing strong demand. But inside the auditorium, the discussion was considerably more serious. The candidates were pushed on how Whitby should attract investment, deal with rapid growth, control costs, build housing and secure support from Queen's Park and Ottawa.

Asked what they would do to bring new investment into Whitby, Leahy focused on the municipality's relationship with the provincial government.

Leahy argued that Whitby needs a more collaborative approach with Queen's Park and linked that relationship to major local priorities, particularly the proposed new hospital.

"We need to work more collaboratively with the province," Leahy said during the debate.

Rajmohan argued for a broader review of existing municipal programs, saying she would examine measurable outcomes before deciding where additional resources should go.

Roy pointed to continued partner-

ships involving Town staff, Durham Region, economic-development officials, the Chamber of Commerce, local BIAs and the provincial government.

All three candidates agreed that Whitby's rapid growth is placing pressure on infrastructure.

Rajmohan argued that municipalities cannot continue waiting until problems become urgent before responding.

Roy pointed to infrastructure investment and the Town's financial participation in Elexicon-related electricity infrastructure as an example of planning for future growth.

Leahy took a different approach, arguing that Whitby should aggressively pursue opportunities arising from major federal spending, including recently announced defence expenditures.

The debate comes as Whitby continues investing heavily in growth-related infrastructure. The Town's adopted 2026 budget includes a \$198-million operating budget and approximately \$62 million in capital investments, including continued spending on roads, facilities and fire protection.

Property taxes produced some of the sharpest exchanges of the night.

Whitby's adopted 2026 budget includes a 3.44 per cent increase in the Town portion of the budget, which the municipality says translates into approximately a 1.2 per cent increase on the total residential property-tax bill, or about \$78 annually for an average home assessed at \$503,000.

Roy said Town staff had already gone line by line through the budget and identified more than \$2 million in savings. That figure is supported by Town budget material, which states that more than \$2 million in internal savings helped reduce the final 2026 budget increase.

Leahy attacked current tax levels and pledged that, if elected, he would freeze the Town of Whitby portion of property taxes for two years.

He also renewed his criticism of mayoral compensation.

During the debate, Leahy said the cut he would make would be to the mayor's compensation.

The Town of Whitby reports that Mayor Roy received \$231,647 in total compensation in 2025, consisting of \$160,998 from the Town

and \$70,649 from the Region of Durham. The Town also states that annual compensation adjustments are determined by a long-standing bylaw using comparative remuneration among other Durham lakeshore municipalities, rather than through councillors simply voting themselves annual raises.

Rajmohan said she wants a detailed audit of spending and argued that residents deserve greater clarity about where their tax dollars are going.

The independent report from the debate similarly described affordability and transparency as major issues raised by both candidates and audience members.

Housing produced another clear difference in approach. Leahy argued that Whitby needs stronger collaboration with the province and said development charges may have to be reduced to encourage more housing construction, particularly affordable housing. He contended that escalating costs and development charges are contributing to stalled projects.

Rajmohan said she supports development but warned against development "at any cost," calling instead for closer examination of individual proposals and their impact on existing communities.

Roy emphasized that housing is both a municipal and regional responsibility and pointed to partnerships with the development community, including a planned 40-unit Habitat for Humanity project in Whitby.

The September 24 debate report also identified the planned Habitat project as one of Roy's examples of affordable-housing initiatives already underway.

The most pointed exchange of the evening came over how Whitby deals with higher levels of government.

Rajmohan said the mayor's responsibility should begin with determining Whitby's priorities and then advocating for them.

Roy said she regularly communicates with the local MP, MPP, provincial officials and other agencies to seek funding and grants for the municipality, local businesses and community organizations.

Leahy said leadership style matters and argued Whitby needs a

more productive relationship with the provincial government. That argument became especially heated when the discussion turned to the proposed Whitby hospital. The proposed new Whitby hospital has become one of the defining issues of the campaign.

In August 2024, the Ontario government announced a broader Durham health-care redevelopment strategy involving Lakeridge Health sites in Bowmanville, Oshawa, Whitby, Ajax and Pickering.

That announcement was made in Oshawa, not Whitby.

During Thursday's debate, Leahy argued that the Whitby hospital project has taken too long to move forward and said improved relations with Queen's Park could help accelerate progress.

He compared Whitby's situation with hospital projects elsewhere in Ontario and argued that stronger government relationships can influence the speed at which major infrastructure proceeds.

Roy defended her advocacy, pointing to her health-care background and ongoing discussions with Lakeridge Health and provincial officials.

She said the hospital project is moving through the necessary planning process and suggested

additional information could be forthcoming.

Rajmohan did not participate directly in the one-on-one hospital exchange between Roy and Leahy. The broader point of disagreement was unmistakable. Roy emphasized continued advocacy and process. Leahy argued that Whitby needs a different approach capable of producing faster results.

Of all the policy commitments made during the debate, one of Leahy's clearest was his pledge to freeze the municipal portion of property taxes for two years.

Whether that can be accomplished while maintaining current services and financing Whitby's infrastructure program would depend on future budgets, revenues, reserves, growth pressures and decisions of the next council. Municipal taxes are also only one component of the overall property-tax bill. Whitby notes that a residential property-tax bill is divided among the Town of Whitby, Durham Region and the education portion established by the province. That means a freeze in the Whitby portion would not necessarily mean a homeowner's total tax bill would remain unchanged. Still, with affordability repeatedly raised by residents and candidates alike, taxes are

clearly becoming a central battlefield in the 2026 mayoral race. The debate revealed three distinct campaign themes.

Roy defended the Town's current direction, emphasizing partnerships, ongoing projects and the need to manage growth while maintaining services.

Leahy argued that Whitby requires a different leadership style, tighter control of municipal costs and a more collaborative relationship with Queen's Park.

Rajmohan positioned herself as an outsider calling for audits, measurable results and greater transparency before continuing with business as usual.

The Whitby Chamber of Commerce said the purpose of the event was not to tell voters whom to support, but to give them information they can use when making their decision. That decision now belongs to Whitby voters. With the municipal election scheduled for October 26, the debate made one thing clear: The race for mayor is no longer simply about personalities. It is about taxes. It is about housing. It is about growth. It is about infrastructure. And increasingly, it is about which style of leadership Whitby residents believe can deliver results over the next four years.

JM

John Meloche

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