

Opening Remarks:

Good evening, and thank you to the Escarpment Corridor Alliance for bringing us together.

For those I haven't met, I'm Rachel Gilliland, and I'm running for Deputy Mayor of The Town of The Blue Mountains.

For the past eight years, I've served as an elected official, including in a rotating Deputy Mayor role in Aurora. During that time, environmental stewardship has been a significant part of my municipal work. Especially, since much of the town sat on the Oak Ridges Moraine.

I brought forward the motion that re-established our Environmental Advisory Committee and served as its Chair. I completed the Federation of Canadian Municipalities Climate Leadership program, participated in the Ontario Climate Caucus, sat in on many Conservation Authority meetings, and served on the Community Energy Plan working group.

But what matters more to me is putting that knowledge into action.

I've brought forward initiatives dealing with natural-capital asset management, wetland protection and invasive Phragmites, urban forestry, heritage trees, natural-heritage mapping and incorporating a climate lens into municipal decision-making.

That experience taught me that environmental protection cannot sit in its own silo.

It is connected to how we plan growth, where we build housing, how we manage infrastructure, how we protect farmland and watersheds, and ultimately how we spend taxpayers' money.

That is particularly important here. The Escarpment, Georgian Bay, our agricultural lands, forests, wetlands and watersheds are not simply beautiful features surrounding our communities. They are part of the environmental and economic foundation of The Blue Mountains.

My approach is not to stop change. It is to manage change responsibly—protecting what cannot be replaced while planning thoughtfully for what comes next.

That is the perspective and municipal experience I would bring to the Deputy Mayor's role.

QUESTIONS:

1. Protecting Natural Heritage, Watershed & Climate Resilience

If I were to identify one specific action, it would be to move from simply identifying our natural areas to actually having a plan to protect and care for them over the long term. Or Stewardship.

The Town has already done some important groundwork through its Sustainability Plan. One of its commitments, called Bold Action #5, was to create an inventory of natural assets — things like wetlands, forests, soils and other natural features that help manage water, reduce flooding, support habitat and make our community more resilient.

That inventory work has now been done.

So for me, the next question is: what do we do with that information?

I believe we need to move into stewardship. That means understanding which natural areas are most vulnerable, how they should be protected and maintained, and making sure that work is built into our long-term planning and asset-management decisions.

That is very similar to work I supported in Aurora. I brought forward a motion that helped lead to Aurora's Natural Capital Asset Management Plan, and I specifically wanted stewardship and maintenance to be part of that work — not just putting natural features on a map.

I would also want that coordinated with Grey County, because watersheds, groundwater and wildlife corridors do not stop at municipal boundaries.

I see this as a high priority because protecting natural systems is not separate from infrastructure, growth or finances. If we lose those systems, they can be very difficult and very expensive to replace.

2. Balancing Farmland, Growth & Nature

I start from a simple principle: agriculture is not vacant land waiting for another use. It is an economic sector, a food-producing land base and an important part of the identity of The Blue Mountains. Especially our apple orchard industry.

So I would be very cautious about re-designating agricultural land simply because development pressure exists.

At the same time, we do need housing and economic growth. For me, the real question is where that growth should go.

My preference is to first look at serviced settlement areas, appropriate intensification, redevelopment and underutilized lands before expanding onto productive agricultural land or significant natural areas.

I also think we have to look at farmland as part of a broader agricultural system, not just one parcel at a time. Once productive agricultural land is lost to development, it is very difficult to get back.

I would also use the relationships I have already built with agricultural leaders and representatives at other levels of government, including MP Scot Davidson and longtime Councillor Avia Eek, who have worked for years on protecting Holland Marsh farmland in their communities. Working together on aligned initiatives across the province carries weight, particularly when broader farmland protection issues require advocacy.

This isn't about saying no to growth. It is about being disciplined about where growth goes, using serviced areas more efficiently, and protecting the agricultural lands and natural areas that cannot easily be replaced.

3. Castle Glen Development

My preferred outcome for Castle Glen is the greatest protection and long-term stewardship of its significant natural heritage and watershed features that can lawfully be achieved, while recognizing the planning history that already exists.

Castle Glen is unusual because there is an existing Secondary Plan and the lands have been designated for development. But there is currently no active development application, and that Secondary Plan contains requirements that must be satisfied before development can proceed.

So I would not describe the existing Secondary Plan as an automatic green light.

I've had the opportunity to walk the area, and its environmental significance is obvious. If a future application comes forward, I would expect rigorous environmental review based on **current science and current site conditions, including groundwater, wetlands, woodlands, headwaters and the broader natural heritage system.**

I have seen this kind of approach work before. In Aurora, I supported the Town's efforts to defend environmentally significant lands known as Henderson Forest on the Oak Ridges Moraine. Those applications were refused, that position was upheld on appeal, and several years later the Town was able to purchase the eight-acre property and preserve it.

That experience reinforced something I strongly believe: environmental protection can take patience. You use every legitimate planning tool available, defend the public interest, and remain open to partnerships or acquisition opportunities when they arise.

For Castle Glen, I would want the Town working with Grey County, the Niagara Escarpment Commission, conservation organizations, the landowner and senior governments to explore those opportunities.

I would never promise that Council can simply erase decades of planning history. But I would use every legitimate planning, environmental and partnership tool available to achieve the greatest protection we lawfully can.

4. Housing, Growth & Natural Areas

I don't think **unit count alone is a housing strategy**.

We have to ask what kind of housing is being built, where it is being built and whether the people who work and live here can realistically afford it.

The Town already has housing policies and an Affordable Housing Action Plan. My focus would be on implementing those tools and measuring results rather than commissioning another study.

I support additional residential units and gentle intensification in appropriate serviced areas. TBM already permits up to three units as-of-right on qualifying serviced residential properties, and I would be open to examining four units in appropriate fully serviced settlement areas, subject to servicing capacity, parking, building form and neighbourhood context.

But I would not apply that indiscriminately across rural areas, specialty agricultural lands, Niagara Escarpment lands or environmentally constrained properties.

If we can accommodate more people through appropriate density, redevelopment and better use of serviced land, we reduce pressure to expand onto farmland and natural areas.

We also need to work closely with Grey County across the housing continuum.

And I want measurable outcomes: **How many rental and attainable units are we creating, and are workers, seniors, young adults and families actually able to live in them?**

Finally, when good housing projects come before Council, we also have to be prepared to be supportive, collaborate and guide the success of an application towards an approval.