

CUPE sizes up would-be mayors

by Dave Dale
The Nugget

Unionized city workers can expect open dialogue with North Bay's new mayor, according to promises made Wednesday at an all-candidates' forum at Branch 23 of the Royal Canadian Legion. And if the business case can be proven, Canadian Union of Public Employees' members were told, previously privatized services may come back under the umbrella of the public-service sector.

But candidates for North Bay's top job said there needs to be continued cooperation of management and staff to find efficiencies and a focus on economic development to broaden the property tax base. "Financial problems, in my view, will not be solved by contracting out," Lynne Bennett said. Bennett, who has overseen contract negotiations with city workers as chairwoman of the general government committee for seven years, said she "values" what public-sector employees do for the city. When she couldn't be on the picket lines supporting unionized workers, Bennett said she "worked behind the scenes" to protect their interests.

Vic Fedeli said labour representatives were among 100 people involved in the "crafting" of his plan to make the city a better place to live and work. "I don't think all the solutions are in the building," Fedeli said, referring to city hall administration and the need to communicate with frontline workers. Fedeli said, however, he doesn't know if the city can buy 28 garbage trucks "from scratch" to get back into the trash collection business. "But I want to talk to you about that," he said.

Jeff Marceau said he would "definitely" take back services such as street paving, sweeping, snow hauling, sodding, water and sewer installation, water main repairs, and the operation of water and sewage plants. "Obviously there's a way to make money doing these things, and we should keep the money local," Marceau said.

Tim Wright said he's not in favour of privatization and agreed with the statement provided by the CUPE that "public services are best performed by public employees". "But I think there is room for public- and private-sector partnerships." Wright also said he "didn't agree with the way "North Bay Hydro Ltd. was pushed out of the public fold and the way employees were treated during the strike last year. And responding to a CUPE questionnaire from Hydro workers, he agreed the utility's board, appointed by council, should be "dissolved" and replaced with elected commissioners. Candidates disagreed, however, about how their opponents would go about some of their economic development ideas.

Wright and Marceau didn't agree with Fedeli's plan to sell serviced industrial land to companies for \$1 an acre, even if it is conditional on creating 50 jobs and building within 12 months. "We do not need to give the resources we have away," said Wright, who said he knows the former president of the Toronto Real Estate Board. He said there already is a facility available to market North Bay property worldwide.

Quality of life

Marceau said the "quality of life" here needs to be marketed better and the city is "on the verge of an economic boom" that will come "regardless of who gets in" and that he isn't a fan of selling land cheap.

Bennett said she would "engage the whole community...and not just 100 people" to chart the city's course for the future.

In his closing remarks, Fedeli reached out to city and hydro workers by saying, "we need to employ your minds as well as your muscles" to make changes.