

LOOKING BEYOND THE BRT THIS ELECTION

With the tweeting and auto tariff-threatening Donald Trump, the populist fervor of Doug Ford Nation sweeping Ontario and marijuana soon to be legal, local voters will decide on whether to dig deeper into the progressive soil promised by Matt Brown in 2014 or retreat to the familiar caution of political veterans and more conservative city planning. This makes the Oct. 22nd mayoral race a symbolic statement on how Londoners want to grow during uncertain times.

BY PATRICK MORLEY

HOW QUICKLY THINGS change.

Four years ago, shortly after the 2014 municipal election, they shared a group hug. Newly-elected Mayor Matt Brown and a group of 11 progressively-minded first-time councilors stood encircled after their swearing-in ceremony and promised sunnier days for London.

Sunnier meant shovels in the ground on the Dundas flex street, approving an important growth strategy... and green-lighting an ambitious rapid transit plan.

The former are shining examples of a productive city council, while the latter – in the form of bus rapid transit (BRT) – is driving Londoners apart.

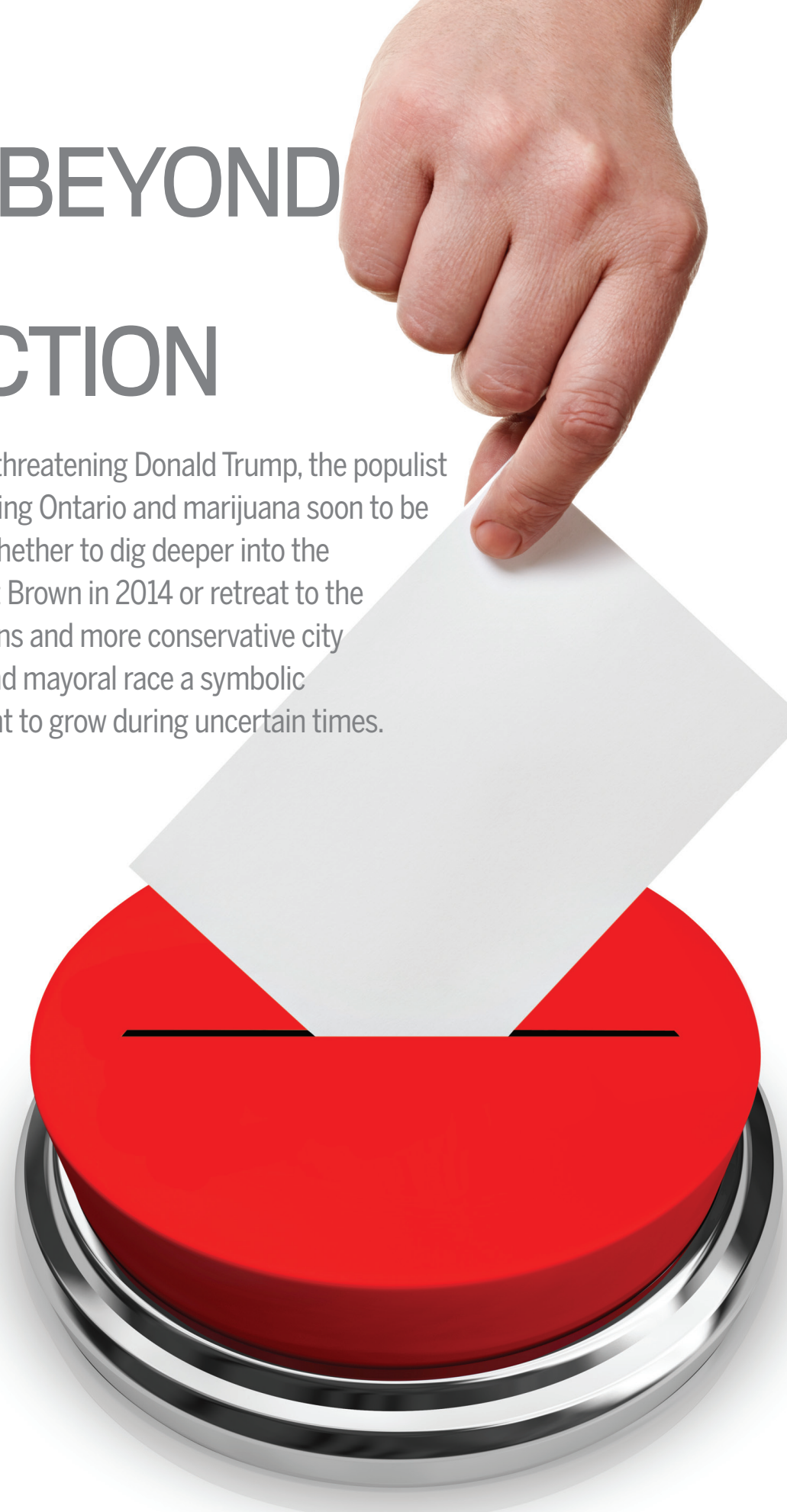
However, BRT is not the only election issue facing Londoners – despite its oxygen-hoarding dominance in the press and on the lips of municipal candidates.

In hindsight, this hug and promise of progressive ideals has led to a tumult of uncertainty as the Oct. 22nd municipal election looms.

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London, no doubt, has warts. Its new mayor, incumbent and rookie councilors will have an unenviable job.

Data from the 2016 census showed that 18,000 Londoners are unemployed and 146,000 are not participating in the labour force. We're the largest Canadian city without modern rapid transit. More than 400 Londoners have died from opioid over-



doses this decade. It's numbers like these that compelled London's poet laureate, Tom Cull, to write, "Numbers can't count lives [...] / We search now for new math."

We have a city hall-supported Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) plan along with a 2,000 strong grass-roots opposition and three front-running mayoral candidates who'd like to see it scrapped. Light rail is now a distant pipe dream and railway underpasses years away.

London can feel as divided politically as the rail route that slices the city in half. Throw pot legalization, the provincial governments scrapping of green energy projects, looming auto tariffs and a local housing crisis into the mix, and the divisions stretch regionally, across the country and globe.

No surprise then that the inglorious job of leading city council is most likely going to fall on the shoulders of either a relative political rookie, a businessperson, a former federal political heavyweight or the former board chair of the police services board.

The wildcard in all of this pre-election prognostication is how ranked ballot municipal voting will affect the outcome of the vote. *

When it comes down to what voters want from their new mayor and council, the answer is complicated. Political experts all agree that when a city as divided as London heads to the polls, with the future of the economy and the health of its citizens on the line, voters often end up choosing caution over progress.

With so many unknowns at play, these same experts say that the mayor's office will likely be a four-horse race between Ed Holder, Paul Paolatto and Paul Cheng carrying the torch of the right and lone wolf Tanya Park on the left.

Beyond BRT arguments, lack of affordable housing is the root cause of slow local economic growth, according to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM). When housing prices are high and vacancies are low, labour markets suffer because growing businesses are unable to attract and retain new talent.

Finding ways to keep housing and rental prices stable along with creating an abundance of social housing (which experts say is vital to get people working) is something a city council can dramatically influence.

London is not immune to this issue. With the GTA and commuters slowly creeping west down the 401 toward London and promises of future high-speed rail, it's only a matter of time until we begin to see housing prices skyrocket. Welcome news for home-

owners who have bought low, but not for growing businesses looking to recruit talent.

Furthermore, in London the availability of social-housing is at a crisis point, something all mayoral candidates agree on. When citizens are housed, they work more and spend more. The London Middlesex Housing Corporation is facing an infrastructure deficit of \$228 million. Funding for housing must come from all levels of government, according to Park. As a result, she sees the mayor's seat as the most important component in securing capital to keep Londoners housed and contributing to the local economy.

"London can be a place where all new developments include affordable units. To achieve this, local government and private sector companies must work together," she says in her platform. "Housing issues require long-term strategies and plans, and it will take another term of council to secure the necessary funding from the other levels of government."

Meanwhile, Holder believes that his former connections to all levels of government will help London solve its housing crisis.

"I can pick up the phone and call people at all levels," says Holder. "I understand these

issues, the business needs of the city, to keep people working. I have empathy for the non-profits, it's in my background and reputation as a consensus builder."

Paolatto, as well, is dedicated to "investing in affordable, accessible housing" adding that "it's about time we made helping our most vulnerable a priority."

Looming over many of London's housing, drug and BRT issues is Donald Trump and his threat of economically crippling auto-parts tariffs. The tariffs, described by economists as "potentially devastating" for London and Southwest Ontario, have the ability to permanently damage the local economy. Dave Inman, director of operations for London's CS Automotive Tubing in London, has said the tariffs have caused paranoia in his industry.

Trump's tariffs might become a key issue as the election unfolds. As volatile and inconsistent as Trump can be, he is the new reality. The new city council and mayor will no doubt have to act fast and united in their strategy to protect those most susceptible to potential manufacturing devastation.

But not all political meddling in the economy has the potential to be devastating. With the Ford government's commitment

to privatizing marijuana sales, the more than 20 local head shops (small businesses dedicated to pot smoking paraphernalia) have questions about how the municipality plans to deal with the untapped economic potential of legal weed.

"London has always been friendly with head shop businesses," says Shop 420's Chris Jones. "But I'd like to know if the new council will make new zoning issues for businesses like mine and if there are plans to control the number of shops?"

Park says that it's still early to comment on how the city will handle specific zoning issues. She says that current zoning policies do have a separation distance of 500m between cannabis retail stores and schools, libraries, pools, arenas and other similar sensitive land uses. The city does not have a cap in place for the amount of cannabis retail stores.

It is important to remember that a mayor has only one vote. Their power lies not in a clenched fist but in guiding, uniting and leading. At their best, mayors are coaches, rallying council and voters to achieve tenable goals.

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WHERE THEY STAND ON THE BIG ISSUES



BUS RAPID TRANSIT

ATTRACTING TECH SAVVY MILLENNIALS TO THE CITY

SUPERVISED DRUG CONSUMPTION SITES

TANYA PARK	<p>"Londoners have needed a smart transit plan for a long time and I was proud to be part of a council that finally listened to them. [...] Our local results in the provincial election show that we are a progressive community. Investments along the BRT corridors are already happening."</p>	<p>"We have so much going for us right now. Affordable housing. We're on the 401. We should be a tech start-up leader. Our community has a wealth of education and training institutions. It's critical for the city to work alongside these partners to create a targeted initiative which attracts, trains and retains talent."</p>	<p>"We have a huge health care crisis in London. I support and have pushed for [while a city councillor] supervised consumption sites. We need to find the right solution that takes drug use out of the door fronts of our businesses."</p>
PAUL PAOLATTO	<p>"I don't support the BRT plan as it stands. I want to create a progressive a system as possible for all modes of transport. My mobility plan will unify our city behind a more affordable and secure transportation solution. To improve airline access and prepare for a future of automated cars."</p>	<p>"I want to improve our connections to Toronto, Waterloo, Detroit, Chicago; that's where the young talent is going to grow their ideas. To attract the millennials, I look at cities like Nashville. They're vibrant and exciting. That's what I want for London."</p>	<p>"I promote mobile injection sites because the problem is spread throughout the city. But I want to go further and create recovery centres. We need to give users a chance to recover."</p>
ED HOLDER	<p>"I don't support this BRT plan. But transportation is vital. As long as we have rail crossings dividing our city, we can't be bus rapid."</p>	<p>"If we're not mindful that our manufacturing is under attack with tariffs and challenges of retail, it will be difficult to create an environment of growth. I see our gaming industry exploding and the tech companies creating jobs. We have to create a strong base first and then people will come."</p>	<p>"If we're going to go with safe consumption sites, the location must be strategic. But really, I want to focus on rehabilitation, to keep people alive and help them to move forward."</p>
PAUL CHENG	<p>"I want to halt the BRT. It's not good for London and it serves a small population. We have to first focus on underpasses for the railway first."</p>	<p>"It's not just attracting tech, it's building our own tech sector right here. I challenge the media to show people what's happening in the rest of the world and do it right here. We have to encourage and promote what we have here. This will uncover our niche and boost local initiatives."</p>	<p>"There's confusion on this issue. I want to defer to the experts, to talk more. We need more clarity. There hasn't been enough discussion with business owners."</p>