

Belinda Crowson responses

Candidate for Lethbridge City Council

Privatization, including P3s:

AUPE members know very well that privatization regularly fails to find “efficiencies” and any cost savings are often off the backs of workers who become de-unionized, with lower pay and benefits.

They also work on the front lines of service delivery and see the problems caused by high-turnover low wage private providers, and the bureaucratic burden caused by having to deal with a third party instead of an in-house provider.

1. Will you oppose privatization of municipal services and infrastructure, including Public-Private-Partnerships aka P3s? Will you support bringing previously privatized services in-house?

In general, I support publicly funded and publicly delivered services and find that publicly operated municipal services can operate as efficiently and effectively as a privately funded system and has the added benefit of keeping profits (if there are any) within and for the community and invested back into the community. I think we need to do a better job of highlighting to people all of the services they take for granted which are done through and by municipalities and how greatly their lives are affected by these services.

To be blunt, school busing is one area where I messed up during the last term and, yes, I would consider an option to bring it back into the municipal services if a feasible way could be found to do it.

As well, we need to build in a mechanism to review such decisions on an ongoing basis. For example, in the 1990s it was decided to have our swimming pools operated by a private operator. In the 20 or so years since that was done, has there been any review of whether that continues to be the right model for Lethbridge? Additionally, we did similar with Community and Social Development and now operate with a very reduced staff and expect much of the work to be done by private not for profit organizations. Does they provide the best service for Lethbridge? Is this a suitable way of dealing with the social issues that are facing our community?

As I think more on this issue, we need to build into the system a clause that IF something is privatized, a plan will be developed to review that decision at certain key points to re-evaluate if the decision is actually meeting the needs of the community.

Municipalities as employers:

As our economies recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, good jobs are an important factor. Public sector workers spend in their communities, and many households impacted by private sector recessions have been able to keep the bills paid thanks to a stable public sector job.

2. Will you support your employees and your community by ensuring the municipality employs staff with living wages, full-time hours where desired, job security, and collective bargaining rights?

If I am re-elected, I am but one vote on Council and while I can bring my voice (and the voice and concerns of others) to the table, council's decisions are made by a majority of Council and not one person. I will do my utmost to ensure that the city stays true to its commitment under the collective agreements and respects the rights, needs and concerns of employees and city workers. However, as a city councillor, it would be my responsibility to act in the best interest of the city as a whole and balance everyone's needs.

3. Will you oppose attempts from the provincial government to legislate against municipal staff including cuts to the Local Authorities Pension Plan, or restrictions on their right to strike?

Before I was elected to Council, I was a unionized worker and was part of the union the last time we had to work together to challenge the provincial government's attempts to take over the pension plan. Personally, I oppose cuts to the pension and restrictions on the right to strike. Right to work and other types of legislations are generally about increasing profits on the backs of workers. As an individual, I will absolutely stand up for workers' rights.

However, as noted above, if I am re-elected, I am but one vote on Council and while I can bring my voice (and the voice and concerns of others) to the table, council's decisions are made by a majority of Council and not one person.

Funding:

For decades the trend on public services has been cuts and defunding, with fees downloaded onto workers, and the tax burden shifted away from the wealthy and corporations to the working class. At the same time, workers in the public sector know that tax freezes and cuts mean cuts to services and jobs. Any promise political candidates make can only be realized through proper revenues.

4. How do you propose your municipality deal with funding shortfalls, cuts, and downloading of responsibilities from federal and provincial governments? Do you favour spending cuts over tax increases?

What I actually favour is suitable, reliable, consistent and sustained funding from the other two orders of government, a prioritization of the needs of city residents and an indepth conversation between municipalities and the other two orders of government about how to structure their programs to best meet the needs of our residents. Oh, and we should also look at how cities are funded as property taxes are one of the most unsuitable ways to ensure long-term financial health of municipalities.

However, if that is not forthcoming (and I really suspect it's not), we must realize that by law, a municipality must balance its books and cannot run a deficit. In the short term, there are only a few ways that a city can achieve this – through tax hikes, service cuts, fee increases, use of reserves (which are not unlimited) or a combination of all of the above.

Fortunately, a city has other options in the long-term and if there is good oversight, governance and planning. One thing that can help support keeping services stable AND not resulting in large tax increases is working towards higher density. This results in the better use of infrastructure and spreads the same costs over a more dense population. It means that a city isn't spending so much

money building new, but can concentrate on maintaining what they already have and put more money into the services people wish and require.

As I noted, this is not a short-term solution but will have dramatic long-term impacts and this concept was a significant part of the discussions around the new Municipal Development Plan and is something we need to work towards together as a community. Only with long-term vision can we actually change the sad dilemma we currently have of pitting tax increases against reduced services.

COVID-19 Safety:

With the negligent provincial response to now three preventable waves of COVID-19, municipalities have been put in an awkward position of needing to take measures to protect their citizens throughout the pandemic. Many are introducing measures of their own, but not all have.

5. Do you support measures such as mask mandates, vaccine "passports", and vaccine mandates for staff to limit and reduce the spread of COVID-19 in your municipality?

Yes, I do support such mandates. They need to be done as a short-term mechanism for dealing with the pandemic and as part of ensuring that people are kept safe and that essential services can continue to operate. While I would, of course, look at each issue and mandate specifically, there are some overarching considerations that I use in such cases. First, is this something that needs to be done to keep our residents and community safe? Second, is what is being mandated an effective mechanism for dealing with the virus and has the backing of the medical and scientific community? Third, will mandating it (rather than just requesting people to adopt it) change public behavior and contribute to increased use of the proposed mechanism (ie masks, vaccinations, etc). Fourth, is it enforceable and the punishments suitable to what is being requested? And, fifth, have we ensured that our approach works to find a balance and accommodation for those who for real medical and other reasons cannot participate?

Affordability:

With workers squeezed by increasing costs, municipal fees add to the burden. Service fees are a form of flat tax that require the same payment from a CEO as a low income worker.

Transit affordability is an important piece of working class equity. Fees add an extra burden for many people who can not afford the costs of private transportation in the first place. The reduced emissions on increasing transit ridership can also be a part of how cities take positive action on climate change.

6. Do you support measures to reduce municipal reliance on services fees and fares, such as eliminating transit fares?

Accessibility and equity are some of my core values and I would love to work towards a transit system that has no service fees or fares. And, yes, getting more ridership onto Transit would be a significant way forward in dealing with green house gas emissions from single occupancy vehicles. The work is in coming up with a way to do that effectively and which will be supported by the community.

As I noted above, a municipality is legally unable to run a deficit and service fees and fares, in all areas of the operation, are part of ensuring our legally required responsibility of have a balanced budget. What can we do at this time to move towards a more equitable system that also balances our fiscal responsibilities?

When the Recreation and Culture Fee Assistance Program was created it was based on the Calgary model which provided fee assistance not only for activities, but also for the Transit system. In fact, the two go hand in hand because both the cost of programs and the cost of transit to get to programs are some of the barriers for people. I would suggest we work towards an expansion of the fee assistance program to help cover transit costs for eligible persons. This would permit us to gain both qualitative and quantitative evidence that reduced transit costs supports members of our community and build a better case for moving ahead. I also have no doubt that reduced fees would support people in accessing their work and support workers (and by extension businesses) in the community.

I am certain there are other opportunities as well that we should consider as interim steps.