

AUPE Response – Vesna Higham

October 1, 2021

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?

I know this may not be the definitive answer you were hoping to receive, but this genuinely needs to be answered on a case-by-case basis. Some things I can tell you definitively where I stand, because I've studied out the issue and have taken a position – like municipal policing. I voted to create our own municipal force and will advocate for that again this coming term if elected.

I can tell you the principles I embrace generally. I like to look for efficiencies in any project/service; however, we also need to study the history and best practices of other jurisdictions to determine whether something has a proven record of success or not.

An example of privatized services I've considered and discussed with my colleagues about bringing in-house is crown paving for our roads, which is currently all contracted out to private service providers. This service seems like it should fit under the type of work we do in Public Works, but I've always been told that securing the gravel and other bulk raw resources in sufficient supply is complicated and filled with risk – nevertheless, that is something I would be open to considering.

As for P3s, I've seen examples where they seem to work well, and others where the municipalities were left high and dry by private companies who either bailed (bankruptcy) or failed to fulfill their commitments (breach of contract). So, the jury's still out on this concept for me, as a project business case has never been presented for my review – or even contemplated that I'm aware – in our community, though I know Edmonton has a number of them.

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?

Yes, to my knowledge, our City works hard to ensure competitive wages, job security and collective bargaining rights. With respect to full-time hours, I believe that should always be the goal; however, there certainly has to be a role in every work force for part-time hours as well to address both flexibility for certain employees who work with the City as a second job for example, and the municipality who needs flexibility to fill positions and workloads in a given department.

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?

Except in certain essential services, like fire, ambulance, and police, etc., the right to strike or carry out other work-related action is well-established and I respect that. I don't support cuts to LAPP, except where, for example, benefits are three-tiered supplementary and elitist to only the most senior management in the municipality.

3. 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?

Well, I'm not a big fan of large tax increases to deal with funding shortfalls, so honestly, I would likely look more to spending cuts than tax increases to keep tax increases reasonable.

4. 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 didn't think it would need to come to this point, but given where we're at as a municipality, it simply is time to take these actions to protect not only our civic employees and organizational capacity, but also our community generally.

While I support masking mandates and vaccine passports for the general population, I don't support mandatory vaccination as a blanket requirement for all citizens – I'm just not there. I do, however, support it in the context of a workplace environment, where management needs to protect both their employees and the public they serve.

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

With the greatest respect, I don't support eliminating transit fees altogether and am not aware of any municipality in the country that can afford to do so. Transit is already significantly subsidized (around 66%) and I don't think it would be economically feasible or politically responsible to make such a bold move.

I do think we need to give careful consideration to reducing or towing the line on certain other municipal fees like rec fees and access & facility rental fees, etc.