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Henderson: Mayoral candidates put accessibility issues in spotlight

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Helen Henderson

The bombast on the state of Toronto's financial capital is inescapable in the final stretch of the race to rule the city. But my vote for what will make or break us as a healthy city rests on social capital.

Social capital is all about our ability to live with each other, to build communities that include everyone. It counts as assets people of all backgrounds and abilities, banking the diverse talents necessary to sustain future generations who treat each other with respect.

How will Toronto's next mayor create a more inclusive Toronto, a city accessible to everyone?

Ask the candidates themselves as they debate the issues from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., Wednesday, Sept. 22 at Trinity St. Paul's United Church on Bloor St., just west of Spadina Ave. The moderator will be Ing Wong-Ward, producer of CBC Radio Toronto's "Here and Now." I'll be saying a few words beforehand and the city plans to have its accessible voting equipment available for testing from 10:30 a.m. to noon.

How will each of the candidates foster a culture of inclusion? How will they make sure their decisions are informed by community needs?

What concrete actions will they take to make sure the city and province work constructively together on accessible transportation? The current Wheel-Trans system is overburdened. In accessible subway stations, elevators frequently break down. Unless everyone has a means of getting there, we cannot claim this is a city with equal access to community events and employment.

Stable, affordable housing is one of the crucial building blocks for both physical and mental health. It is the very foundation of thriving neighbourhoods and communities.

Families that include someone with a disability usually live close to, if not below, the poverty line. What will the candidates do to give those in need access to a safe place to call home?

And what will they do to make sure people with mental-health issues are welcomed as part of vibrant, diverse communities. Are they aware of the growing body of research showing that "housing first" policies pay huge dividends in the area of mental health?

Will they encourage employers to hire qualified people with disabilities? If so, how? Will they make sure that any new buildings and infrastructures are accessible?

How will they ensure that the city takes accessibility into account right from the planning stages of new programs and systems?

What role will they set for the city in educating everyone about the value of creating a more inclusive environment and culture?

Toronto already has a Disability Issues Committee, full of energetic members. How do the candidates view the committee? Would they consider expanding its role?

This city has a lot of talent just waiting to be harnessed. Let's show the candidates we mean business.

The mayoralty debate is sponsored by ARCH Disability Law Centre, the Centre for Independent Living in Toronto, Pooran Law, Scadding Court Community Centre, the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario and the Canadian Hearing Society.

Real-time captioning, ASL interpretation and attendant care will be available.

So — be there Wednesday, Sept. 22 from 1 to 3 p.m. at Trinity St. Paul's United Church, 427 Bloor St. W., one block west of Spadina Ave. For more information, contact Susanne Burkhardt at 416-392-0335, ext. 248 or sburkhardt@scaddingcourt.org

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