

Faith school funding dominates Thornhill debate

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It was a packed house at the Bayt Synagogue in Thornhill last night as voters seized the chance to put their questions to candidates in next month's provincial election. But if residents were expecting a debate filled with knock-out punches and ill will between the hopefuls, they were in for a surprise.

While faith-based school funding dominated the agenda, security, youth violence and health care were also top of mind for constituents who attended the debate.

When asked where his party stood on faith-based funding, Liberal incumbent MPP Mario Racco reiterated what many in the room already knew.

"Our party doesn't see this as the time to fund faith-based schools. We are very clear on that. We will not take on something new until what is there is repaired," Mr. Racco said.

He then took direct aim at the Conservative platform.

"The Conservatives have not spelled out anything. Where are the specifics? In politics, you don't make an announcement until you have the specifics," Mr. Racco said.

Progressive Conservative candidate Peter Shurman was quick to respond.

"You do extend funding to faith-based schools. They're called Catholic schools," Mr. Shurman said, to loud applause. "Faith-based schools are not in our imagination. It exists now. Would it be okay if Catholics got hip transplants and all the rest of you didn't?" Mr. Shurman asked.

More than 80 questions were submitted by the largely pro-Shurman crowd. One voter asked candidates why Thornhill was so under-serviced when it came to health care.

"Because they haven't built anything since I moved here in 1983," was Mr. Shurman's quick retort.

"Mario's been talking about a hospital since he was a Vaughan councillor and there's still no hospital in Vaughan, there's a study," Mr. Shurman said.

Mr. Racco was quick to respond.

"Peter does not live in Thornhill so he doesn't know what's going on. There are three hospitals in York Region slated for expansion. There is a community health centre to be built in Vaughan," Mr. Racco said, pointing to former Vaughan mayor Michael Di Biase, who was in attendance, for acknowledgment.

"It was your party, Peter, that destroyed health care. Do not accuse us of things we did not do."

The much-criticized provincial health tax was also discussed, with Mr. Shurman vowing to repeal it and Mr. Racco saying it was necessary.

"I would love not to have to pay the tax, but we need money for health care," Mr. Racco said.

The night didn't only belong to the two front runners, however. Malcolm Kojokaro, an independent candidate running in the riding, also spoke out on the issues.

"Faith-based funding is not the only issue in this election," Mr. Kojokaro said before rhyming off more than 20 other issues key to the election, including health care, the doctor shortage and transit.

Lindsay King, a candidate from the Freedom Party, also made a brief statement at the beginning of the debate.

"Voting for the Freedom Party is freedom from political perversion," Mr. King said.

For Thornhill resident Gila Gladstone-Martow, who formed the Multi-Faith Coalition for equal funding for faith-based schools, the decision is simple.

"I think it's enough of an issue to decide the riding," said Ms Gladstone-Martow, who is supporting Mr. Shurman's campaign. "This is about people who want faith-based schools."

A mother of four, Ms Gladstone-Martow said her annual salary isn't enough to cover her children's tuition, adding she would not be content if funding was taken away from Catholic schools, as some have proposed.

"That would show that they hate us so much, that they would take away funding from someone else before giving it to us," Ms Gladstone-Martow said.

There is another Thornhill all-candidates meeting Oct. 1, from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m., at Thornhill Secondary School, 167 Dudley Ave.