

Category 221 Community Service

To whom it may concern,

Ahead of the 2019 Federal election, The Haldimand Press discovered that previous hosts of all candidates' debates locally had no plans to hold such events again. Recognizing the need for residents to hear from their candidates on important issues, The Press stepped up to host a debate ourselves. In just two weeks' time we partnered with our local Legion for an event space, sent out the details to candidates, and launched a marketing campaign to inform residents of the date. We had seven candidates and over 100 residents join us, with dozens of questions submitted.

It was a great event, but we knew we could do better.

Fast forward to May 18, 2022 when we hosted an all candidates debate for the provincial race. Now in a larger venue, our in-person attendance grew to around 150 people. More importantly, however, The Press streamed the debate live on Facebook and over Zoom. A couple hundred people tuned in to watch the debate live, and hundreds more watched the recordings in the coming days.

The lead up to this event required significant planning. For one, we had to ensure residents knew about the upcoming debate. This meant creating and distributing newspaper and social media advertisements and articles in the weeks prior. Other distribution methods included email blasts through our local business associations.

We partnered with a local Lions club this time for the venue, knowing their space was not only larger but includes significant improvements to internet access for streaming. Our partnership with a local filmmaker provided us with cameras and a cameraman. Through him, we met with and hired additional professionals to ensure the audio and video streamed seamlessly to those watching at home. While our partner provided some of the technology needed for filming, we still needed a collection of mics for the candidates, a mixing board, and so on. As we live and work in a rural area, this required a drive out to a nearby city to rent the needed supplies, with another drive back to return everything.

We also hired former CHCH news anchor Connie Smith to moderate the event, while our original event was moderated by a co-publisher, and Smith brought in a high level of professionalism and talent.

A Zoom subscription was purchased in advance, and we had to learn to operate a meeting that allowed viewers to participate in the comments without being able to interrupt the video. This included moderating the chat the night of to ensure a reasonable decorum was maintained, a difficult task when people feel so safe behind their screens. The night of also required the set up and take down of several tables for candidates to use before and during the debate, along with seating for everyone in attendance. We provided water, pens, and copies of the newspaper as well.

Questions were received both prior to the event through email and on question slips provided to in-person attendees. With dozens of questions submitted, this required sorting through them all to pull out the questions that were most popular and pertinent to residents, recognizing our limited time.

Following the debate our reporter wrote an overview of the highlights, released both in paper and online, and directed people once again to watch the video in its entirety online.

The feedback from this event was significant and wholly positive. Residents both in person and online, along with the candidates attending, thanked us for hosting the event, noting how well it was run in comparison to other local debates.

While these candidate debates require significant work on our behalf in the weeks leading up to them, we are proud of the service we are providing our community. Not only is it important to vote, but it is important to vote as an informed citizen. By offering this debate not just in person but online through multiple platforms, we ensured that anyone interested in being informed had the opportunity.

This is why the debate was just one piece of our candidate coverage leading up to the election. Additionally, we offered a free profile of every candidate on the ballot; despite being a subscription paper, we left these articles open to the public on our website to ensure a greater reach.

Reaching this goal proved particularly difficult during this year's provincial election as well, since the PC Party put a stranglehold on its candidate in our region – our mayor at the time. He suddenly went silent and refused to attend our debate in the guise of spending that time with constituents, exactly what our debate would have given him. While The Press specifically does not publicly support any political party over another, this transgression could not go unnoted and was marked by a letter to our readers.

Along with offering candidates a platform to share their messaging through advertising, The Press' extensive coverage of our candidate platforms and providing the debate ensured our readers and general community had the best possible chance to be fully informed voters.

Thank you for your consideration,

Kaitlyn Clark

Co-Publisher