Austin Force Questions for Bernia Martin: September 20, 2026

Why are you running for Deputy Mayor–County Councillor, and what experience, knowledge, or preparation do you believe equips you for the responsibilities of the position?

I am running because I am ready for the job.

I love municipal government. I believe strongly in public service, and I have spent much of my professional life working with municipalities and communities. Before being elected to Council, I spent more than 15 years working in municipal economic development, helping communities attract investment, support businesses, plan for growth and navigate the relationship between government and the private sector.

For the past four years, I have represented Woodstock at both City and Oxford County Councils. That experience matters because this is not simply a Deputy Mayor position. It is also a County Councillor position.

I currently serve as Deputy Warden of Oxford County. I have chaired the Southwestern Public Health Board of Health and served on committees and boards dealing with community safety and well-being, economic development, social planning, road safety and the Woodstock Public Library.

Those experiences have taught me something important about leadership: the work doesn't begin when the meeting starts and end when the meeting adjourns.

I read staff reports thoroughly. I ask questions. I meet with staff. I speak with other councillors. I advocate with provincial and federal representatives. I try to understand not only what a recommendation will accomplish today, but what it means five, ten or twenty years from now.

The Deputy Mayor needs to be capable of stepping into the Mayor's role without a learning curve. I believe my City, County and Deputy Warden experience has prepared me to do that.

What do you believe are the three most important issues facing Woodstock during the 2026–2030 term, and why?

1. Managing growth without sacrificing affordability or quality of life.

Woodstock is growing. Growth brings opportunity, but it also creates pressure on roads, recreation, emergency services, water and wastewater infrastructure, parks, housing and municipal staffing.

The question isn't whether Woodstock will grow. The question is whether we manage that growth well.

We need the right housing in the right places, infrastructure that keeps pace with development, and careful financial planning so existing taxpayers aren't continually asked to subsidize the cost of growth.

2. Affordability and long-term financial sustainability.

Municipalities are facing the same inflationary pressures as households. Construction costs have increased dramatically. Infrastructure is expensive. Residents expect good services, but their ability to absorb tax increases is not unlimited.

This means Council needs to become even more disciplined about priorities.

Every worthwhile idea cannot automatically become an immediate project. Council needs to ask: Is this necessary? Is it the right time? What does it cost to operate after we build it? What are we giving up by doing it? Can we borrow less? Can we phase it differently?

I don't believe responsible budgeting means simply saying "no." It means understanding the consequences of both yes and no.

3. Quality of life and the social challenges affecting our community.

Homelessness, addiction, mental health, public safety and the health of our downtown are interconnected issues. No single government controls all the solutions.

Woodstock needs to continue working with Oxford County, public health, police, healthcare providers, community organizations and the provincial government rather than pretending one municipality can solve these issues independently.

I want Woodstock to be a community where people can build a life, raise a family, operate a business and feel that they belong.

If elected, what three specific changes, projects, policies, or outcomes would you most want to accomplish?

First, I want to move the North Woodstock Recreation Complex from planning toward construction in a financially responsible way.

Woodstock needs additional recreation capacity, but a project of this magnitude requires careful decisions about design, debt, development charges, partnerships, grants and long-term operating costs. I have already been involved in advocating to senior governments for funding opportunities. I want that work to continue.

Second, I want to advance a more coordinated approach to homelessness, addiction, mental health and community well-being, including the County's Homelessness Support Centre and stronger coordination among the organizations providing services.

I don't want our measure of success to be how much money we spend. I want us measuring whether people are actually moving toward housing, treatment, stability and independence.

Third, I want Woodstock to develop a stronger long-term financial and infrastructure strategy.

Council should be looking beyond the next annual budget. I want clearer multi-year forecasting of capital projects, debt, reserves, asset replacement and operating impacts so residents can see what today's decisions mean for tomorrow's taxes.

What areas of spending, taxation, capital investment, infrastructure, or service delivery would you most want to change?

I would increase investment in infrastructure planning and asset management. Roads, bridges, water, wastewater, facilities and recreation assets eventually have to be replaced. Deferring necessary maintenance can turn today's small tax bill savings into tomorrow's very large bill. We've seen specific examples of this in the current term of council.

I would maintain essential frontline services, while continually examining how they are delivered and whether technology, partnerships or different service models can produce better value.

I would reduce our reliance on debt where reasonable and continue looking for opportunities to use surpluses, reserves, grants and other revenues strategically. Debt is a legitimate municipal financing tool for long-lived infrastructure, but debt payments also reduce the flexibility of future councils.

I would be prepared to defer capital projects that aren't urgent when construction markets, debt levels or competing priorities make the timing wrong. Deferring something does not necessarily mean abandoning it.

And I want us to continue pursuing provincial and federal infrastructure funding and regional partnerships, particularly for major recreation and growth-related infrastructure.

The trade-off is important: every dollar has an opportunity cost. Money committed to one project cannot simultaneously fund another project, reduce debt or remain in the taxpayer's pocket.

Council should be transparent about those choices.

The Deputy Mayor–County Councillor is a new elected office. What problem was it intended to address?

Woodstock previously elected a Mayor, two City-County Councillors and four City Councillors. Council then selected an Acting Mayor annually.

Beginning with the 2026 term, one of those City-County positions becomes the elected Deputy Mayor–County Councillor. Council remains the same size, only the name of one position has been changed.

I think the advantage is continuity and democratic accountability.

Residents now specifically choose the person they believe is prepared to assume the Mayor's responsibilities, when it is necessary.

Because the Deputy Mayor also sits on County Council, that person will already be immersed in both City and County business. That is particularly important in Woodstock because so many services residents rely upon involve both levels of municipal government.

What are the normal responsibilities, authority and limitations?

On an ordinary day, the Deputy Mayor is still one member of Council with one vote. The title does not give the Deputy Mayor authority to independently direct staff, approve spending, create policy or overrule Council.

At Woodstock Council, the Deputy Mayor will participate in debate and decision-making like other members while also being prepared to assume the Mayor's responsibilities when required.

The position also sits on Oxford County Council, just as I have for the past four years. This means participating in decisions involving major County responsibilities and representing Woodstock at that table.

Leadership in municipal government isn't about accumulating individual power. Most meaningful decisions require a majority of Council.

What changes when the Deputy Mayor acts in place of the Mayor?

When the Mayor is absent, unable or unwilling to perform the duties of the office, has a conflict requiring them to step aside, or the office is vacant, the Deputy Mayor can act in the Mayor's place. Please note that Strong Mayor Powers do not fall to the Deputy Mayor in his absence.

Woodstock's procedural rules provide that, in those circumstances, the Deputy Mayor has the rights, powers and privileges of the Chair.

That requires more than knowing how to use a gavel. You need to understand procedure, manage debate fairly, recognize points of order, work with senior staff and represent the municipality appropriately.

That is another reason I believe preparation matters.

How would you maintain independent judgment while maintaining an effective working relationship with the Mayor and Council?

By understanding that disagreement and dysfunction are not the same thing. I don't expect seven members of Council to agree all the time. They shouldn't.

My responsibility is to read the information, ask questions, listen to residents and staff, consider the evidence and then cast my own vote. I believe that once Council makes a decision, we still have to work together the next morning.

Some of the most productive work I have done during this term has happened between Council meetings: talking with another councillor about an issue, asking staff for clarification, finding common ground or figuring out whether an amendment can address legitimate concerns.

Independent thinking doesn't require isolation. I can disagree with someone's vote without deciding I can no longer work with that person.

This is the kind of Council culture I want to help build.

What if Woodstock's interests differ from a broader County priority?

This is one of the most important parts of the job. I represent Woodstock, but when sitting at County Council I also have responsibilities as a member of the governing body of Oxford County.

Those interests are not necessarily opposites.

Woodstock represents a significant share of Oxford's population and economic activity, while Woodstock residents depend every day on County services and

infrastructure. Water, wastewater, social services, housing, paramedic services, long-term care, waste management, and major planning decisions do not stop at municipal boundaries.

When there is genuine disagreement, I would make Woodstock's case clearly and use evidence to support it, but I would also listen to the other municipal representatives. County Council has ten members. Accomplishing anything requires building relationships and finding support.

My approach is not "Woodstock versus Oxford." Woodstock is part of Oxford. We are much more successful when we approach the County table looking for solutions rather than enemies.

Thirty-eight percent (38%) of taxes collected by Oxford County are from county residents who live in Woodstock. In many cases, Woodstock benefits from County services, programs, and spending to a much higher degree than that 38%. Paramedic calls, Long Term Care, Human Services around homelessness prevention and response are highly focused on Woodstock.

Residents don't wake up wondering whether something is a City responsibility or a County responsibility. They just want government to work. I've spent four years at both tables, and I think one of the most important jobs of the Deputy Mayor is helping those two governments work better together.

Is there anything about your employment, businesses or outside activities residents should know?

I understand municipal government as a resident, taxpayer, parent, and downtown business owner and resident, not just as a councillor.

Outside Council, I have spent much of my career in economic development, communications, strategic planning and consulting, including operating my own consulting business. I have also served on community and municipal boards and organizations.

Those experiences give me useful perspectives, but they also create a responsibility to recognize when a professional, business or financial relationship could create a conflict.

I take that responsibility seriously. Residents should be able to ask me about my relationships and interests, and I should be prepared to answer.

Public office is a public trust.

How would you remain accessible and accountable? What measurable commitments would you make?

Accessibility means more than publishing an email address.

I will continue communicating directly with residents through email, telephone, social media, substack articles, community events, and face-to-face conversations. I've even explored the possibility of a post-council podcast to delve deeper into issues and decision made at the council table.

I also believe councillors have an obligation to explain decisions, particularly the complicated ones. Residents shouldn't need a municipal government dictionary to understand development charges, reserves, debentures, tax-supported debt or which level of government delivers which service.

I would make several measurable commitments:

1. Regular public communication explaining significant City and County decisions and upcoming issues.
2. Public explanations of major votes, particularly budgets, major capital projects and issues generating significant community interest.
3. Regular opportunities for residents to meet and ask questions, both in person and online.
4. Annual reporting on the priorities I campaigned on, including what has been completed, what remains underway and what has changed.
5. Accessibility to disagreement. I will respond respectfully to residents who disagree with me and explain why I voted the way I did.

Accountability doesn't mean promising everyone the answer they want. It means being prepared to explain the answer I gave.

Finally, what would you most want a resident to understand when deciding whether to vote for you?

I would ask residents to look at the job and then look at my preparation for it.

The next Deputy Mayor will sit at two Council tables dealing with hundreds of millions of dollars in public budgets, major infrastructure decisions, growth, housing, recreation, roads, water and wastewater, social services, public health and community safety. When necessary, that person must be ready to step into the Mayor's chair.

I have spent much of my professional career working with municipalities. I have spent the past four years representing Woodstock at both City and County Councils. I currently serve as Oxford County's Deputy Warden and have held leadership responsibilities on boards and committees dealing with some of the most complicated issues facing our community.

But experience alone isn't enough. What matters is what you do with it.

I prepare. I ask questions. I challenge assumptions. I work with people between meetings. I understand municipal procedure. I advocate beyond our municipal borders. And I am willing to explain not only what I believe Council should do, but why.

I don't believe leadership means having all the answers. I do believe it means doing the homework, surrounding yourself with good people, listening to expertise, making a decision and accepting responsibility for it.

That is the kind of Deputy Mayor I am asking Woodstock residents to elect.