Politics Changes People

Why I Believe This Is Thorold's Most Important Election

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A personal beginning

I voted for Nella Dekker (D'Epiro) when she first ran for Thorold City Council in 2018. I grew up knowing her, attended the same schools and church, and knew members of her family. Her parents were hardworking people, and I have good memories of the family she came from.

Before she ran, I recall meeting Nella and her younger sister at a local event. We had a pleasant conversation about her involvement with the Thorold Community Activities Group. What stayed with me was the challenge of providing worthwhile community services on a shoestring budget, supported by volunteers and the generosity of local people. I came away impressed.

When she later asked whether I would support her council candidacy, I said yes without hesitation. I probably encouraged a few others to consider her as well. At the time, I believed she had earned my vote.

And she had a memorable first name: Nella. Madonna, Sting, Cher - and, here in Thorold, Nella. I offer that comparison affectionately. The person I knew seemed approachable and unpretentious, someone whose intentions I felt I could understand.

Eight years later, I still wish her well. But personal affection and an assessment of an elected representative's record are different things. This election asks voters to look at both experience and results.

Experience, innocence and the choices we make

We are shaped by our experiences. They influence what we notice, what we believe, whom we trust and the choices we make. Sometimes we choose among the opportunities in front of us. Sometimes we create opportunities of our own. Both require judgment, but creating a new path often requires an additional measure of initiative and courage.

In conversations with people from different backgrounds, I have often asked whether they would have made the same major decisions if they had known everything beforehand. Many acknowledge that they might have chosen differently. That does not mean marriage, parenthood, education or a difficult career was a mistake. It means we enter important parts of life without a complete map.

There is an innocence in that. I do not regard it as a defect. A willingness to trust, hope and try something new can be one of our better qualities. Experience may sharpen our judgment, but it can also make us guarded. Once that earlier innocence disappears, recovering it is difficult. Even a million-dollar reward in the world's largest lost-and-found column would probably not bring it back.

Life does not follow a straight line. It’s not linear at all. Sometimes it resembles a pinball machine: we keep the ball in play while circumstances send it in directions we did not plan. Sometimes by

adding confusion for misdirection in controlling a narrative. So, we as voters need to keep our eye on the ball. Human nature tells us people will try to get away with things they feel they can. So it's our job as parents and voting tax payers to keep accountability and transparency alive and well in Thorold politics. Politics adds its own pressures, loyalties, compromises and incentives.

This next thought is not constructive criticism about Nella or another candidate. In life all we are is nothing more than a sum of our experiences. That's it and nothing more. And this a the foundation of all our decisions and choices moving forward but to qualify that a majority of the time we make choices from what's in front of us rather than create our choices. Those that create are above and beyond those to choose and make the most out of what is in front of them are also above and beyond just not above and beyond that top 1% of the 1% who create their own path.

That is why the question behind this article is not simply whether politics changes people. My question is how elected representatives manage those changes. Do they become more informed and independent? Do they continue asking difficult questions? Or do familiar alliances become a substitute for individual judgment?

Remember we choose friend but not always family as the coined phrase says. But we do choose our elected city officials.

Why I am writing

My aim is to help readers examine the influences surrounding their voting decisions. That includes campaign messages, personal loyalties, incomplete information and my own opinions. You do not have to agree with me for these articles to serve a useful purpose. If they prompt you to check a record or ask a better question, they have contributed something.

I am a retired Thorold resident and a self-funded registered third-party advertiser. I receive no pay for this work. I have no rental properties and, as I see it, no personal financial stake in which councillors win. I do have political views and preferences, and readers should assess my writing with that in mind.

My former work operating my clinics and a national medical think tank gave me the opportunity to work with leading physicians and researchers. Recruiting people, physicians and assessing their judgment and building services taught me to ask what evidence supports a claim and whether a proposed approach can deliver results.

To earn physicians' confidence, my clinics had to provide value through timely cardiac diagnostics, equipment, qualified interpretation and useful information for referring doctors. The point is not to compare myself with medical specialists. It is to explain why I place such importance on preparation, evidence, capable teams and measurable outcomes.

Those habits apply when assessing council candidates. Recent, Relevant and Real experience matters, but so does how a person approaches an unfamiliar problem. Can they explain their reasoning? Can they ask for clarification? Can they recognize when the information is insufficient? Can they disagree constructively?

Think Outside the Bloc – the title for a future article

People often hesitate to say they are judging someone. Call it assessing, and suddenly the same exercise seems acceptable. Elections require assessment. We are choosing people to make consequential decisions on our behalf.

Many Thorold residents, myself included, see recurring voting patterns of alignments that warrant scrutiny. Could all these people be hallucinating that this bloc pattern exists more times than not? Others have used the name "UN-FAB FOUR" to categorize the team of four being Nella Dekker, Ken Sentance, rookie Councillor Tim O'Hare and rookie Councillor Mike De Divitiis during the current term. That is their political description of a pattern, which I also have adopted based on what I see and my opinion, not proof of secret coordination or misconduct. Rookie Councilors Tim O'Hare and Mike De Divitiis first joined council in 2022, and Ken Sentence one term previous to theirs, so that four-person group cannot accurately be applied to the earlier term. The term the UN-FAB FOUR earlier being version 1 in the last term was used to describe Nella Dekker herein and Ken Sentance still on this current council along with Victoria Wilson who lost her seat. Others who were so called members of this foursome decided not to run for re-election

Agreement is not automatically a problem. Councillors may reach the same conclusion independently. The test is whether each can explain the evidence, the trade-offs and their own reasoning. Voters should apply that test to every councillor, including those whose positions I favor. And if the pattern is seen too often, naturally it will get questioned over and over and perceptions and assessments occur. So, Nella Dekker and Ken Sentence survived their first term record. Not by much though. Hence many say that that term was poor in transparency, controlled the narrative and also caused enough chaos to divert attention away from their record. This is an opinion based on the talk of the town and how many voters perceived the term. Nonetheless they survived it. Even with all the arguing and poor treatment of voters who disagreed and other councilor’s questioning it who seemed to be constantly dismissed making that term quite dysfunctional and divisive. Many blamed the UN-FAB FOUR but the that may have discouraged voters from voting because they lost confidence in the democracy in council. Plus the changing of the voting polls and on-line voting with less election security may have been a contributing factor many have said.

Candidates need to think outside the box. In Thorold, I would add that they need to think OUTSIDE THE BLOC.

Constructive criticism of a vote is not a personal attack. A representative should be able to explain a decision without treating the questioner as an enemy. Equally, residents should challenge decisions without assuming that every disagreement reveals bad faith.

Nella's first term: an early and difficult test

Nella's first term began on December 1, 2018. The new council's inaugural meeting took place on December 4. Within about six months, she was participating in decisions about Canada Games Park on Brock University land in Thorold.

On May 21, 2019, council debated a conditional commitment of up to $7 million: $5 million for the facility and $2 million for servicing. On December 3, 2019, council voted 6-3 to proceed with the partnership. Nella and Ken Sentance voted in favour; Anthony Longo, Carmen DeRose and Jim Handley voted against. [1]

This was a substantial and complicated decision for a newly elected councillor. Supporters saw a chance to replace aging recreation infrastructure and provide wider community amenities. Critics questioned the financial model, not the project particularly but the operating obligations Thorold took on and information available before approval. In short, many believe, we could have obtained a much better deal very easily and put these funds towards all the communities in Thorold including but not limited to Port Robinson who seems to rarely make the to do list and

when they do, it doesn’t make the budget cuts as much as it should. Thorold South and Allanburg seem to be ignored in the same fashion. Ironic since these three communities seem to have more industrial base together than the rest of Thorold combined. Since the industrial base keeps all of our residential tax rates lower and they finance the city to such a big degree, the Mayor of Thorold was lucky that the separatists from Quebec and Alberta didn’t move in to these communities the same way 2 other candidates currently running who don’t live in Thorold did. I’m trying to be funny, but you get my point, especially that I don’t live in these areas but speak up for them should be telling.

The disagreements continued into 2021, when approval of the consortium agreement prompted heated exchanges and accusations of secrecy. Mayor Terry Ugulini maintained that the process had been open and transparent. [2]

In my opinion, the project became an important test of how council handled disagreement and public scrutiny. Making agreements available is helpful, but voters also need a clear explanation of the city's rights, costs, risks and obligations.

I am not presenting a verified 40-year cost projection in this draft. Figures such as $100 million or $130 million require a documented calculation, assumptions and a clear distinction between the project's total costs and Thorold's share. The ownership question also needs to be explained through the actual agreement, rather than reduced to an unsupported assertion that Thorold owns nothing.

I cannot know what pressure Nella felt or what private conversations influenced her to vote with the so-called bloc group of four as it seemed that Port Robinson, Thorold South and Allanburg got even less from the tax base they generate from their huge industrial base for taxes. Nella may have faced a difficult introduction to municipal politics. Nevertheless, every councillor remains responsible for the votes they cast.

A second term and a record to assess

Nella's second term began on November 15, 2022, and ends on November 14, 2026. In the 2022 election, she placed seventh with 1,506 votes. Jim Handley won the eighth seat with 1,454, and Victoria Wilson placed ninth with 1,451. Nella therefore finished 55 votes ahead of the highest-placed unsuccessful candidate, not 47. [3]

In 2018, Nella secured the eighth seat, finishing 15 votes ahead of Jean D'Amelio Swyer. I have not yet verified her exact vote total for that election. [4]

These results show that she won both elections. They do not tell us why individual voters supported or rejected a candidate. I would not totally attribute Victoria Wilson's defeat to Canada Games Park without evidence of voters' reasons. But many told me they didn’t vote for her because of her supporting this project. And since she only lost by 3 votes, you can see the irony here when I was told by more than three people that this was the reason they didn’t vote for her.

The same care applies to names used in elections. Contemporary coverage already called Nella "Nella Dekker" in 2018. The 2022 official results listed "Nella Dekker (D'Epiro)." I have found no basis for suggesting she changed her surname between those elections to escape her record. The supporting chart appears at the end. [3, 4]

Three second-term decisions deserve particular attention. In August 2023, Nella supported the Allanburg townhouse approval at 2248 Centre Street, despite residents' concerns about traffic and water pressure. In October 2023, she opposed seeking an external legal opinion about

Canada Games Park. In June 2026, she supported opening Lakeview Cemetery's Section A for Muslim burial accommodation; that proposal was defeated. [5, 6, 7].

Each decision has its own context. My disagreement with a vote does not establish incompetence, dishonesty or improper coordination. It does entitle me, and every other voter, to ask why she reached that conclusion and how she weighed the alternatives.

The appendix provides a broader list of disputed issues during her tenure. Where her individual vote has not been verified, the chart says so. A controversy involving council is not automatically a finding against Nella.

Preparation, competence and accountability

I believe councillors should arrive at meetings having read the material, understood the recommendations and identified the questions that still need answers. Asking for clarification is a responsible part of that work. And to answer back upset as Nella has done so many times from her frustrations of being questioned is a reason for assessment alone. Not to mention her unwillingness to vote for a review of the deal. A deal she said that she was proud of and stands by. If I had a good report card, I would welcome a review. So should she have, many said. Voting without understanding a proposal would be a different matter.

I recall exchanges that left me concerned about Nella's understanding of motions. Those recollections need to be checked against the full meeting recordings before I attach an exact quotation or draw a firm conclusion. A short clip or another person's agreement with my recollection is not a substitute for the complete context. But I do recall many questioned her when one meeting she led a motion for a vote and it was successful. Then in a subsequent meeting she said when the conversation returned to council that she didn’t understand the motion and could someone explain it to her. Another time she voted by saying I don’t understand this motion but I’ll support it because another candidate supported it and he must have done his homework. And this was not a vote that was unanimous in nature. I’ll leave that assessment to the readers.

The useful questions are straightforward: What did the councillor understand at the time of the vote? What information was missing? Was clarification obtained? What was the motivation? Was it just to belong to a winning team of the vote? Can the decision now be explained to residents? Did they do enough research and read all the material given to them prior to their council meeting?

These questions should be asked consistently of all candidates. Personal familiarity, years in office and community service can inform our assessment, but they should not replace examination of the record.

Independent judgment and the pressure to belong

Why did Nella so often vote with the group I describe in this article? Did she independently reach the same conclusions, or did she feel pressure to follow others when important questions remained unanswered? Did belonging to the group that carried a motion matter to her? Where a motion required five votes on the nine-member council, was her support sometimes decisive in bringing the group of four, together with another councillor or the mayor, to the majority needed for approval? If so, did that create considerable pressure to stay with the group? Was the desire to be part of the winning side ever stronger than the willingness to question the proposal? I do not know her private motivations, and shared votes alone cannot answer these questions. They are questions for Nella to address by explaining her reasoning, the information she relied on and examples of occasions when she disagreed with her frequent voting allies.

If Desi Arnaz, who played Ricky Ricardo, were still alive, would he tell Nella, “NELLA, YOU HAVE A LOT OF ’SPLAININ’ TO DO”? I say you still have time to clear this up. Where is your website? If my understanding is correct that three of the four candidates seeking re-election whom many call the “UN-FAB FOUR” do not have campaign websites, is that a coincidence? This is your chance to ’splain. Do not waste your opportunity to ’splain, because Thorold has invested in you, you deserve the best opportunity to earn another term, and voters deserve answers. If you will not do it for the voters, do it for yourself. Sometimes a little humour gets the point across better. It is not personal. You should at least try to explain. If not, perhaps you feel you have enough support to be re-elected without explaining. Either way, that is my free, unsolicited advice. It comes without any obligation to follow it, and I wish you, Nella, only the very best.

Why this election matters to me

Thorold is a municipal corporation, and council oversees public money, services, infrastructure and decisions with long-term consequences. The comparison with a corporate board is useful when considering competence and oversight, although municipal government also has public obligations that make it different from a private business.

I do not interpret that role as requiring councillors to put the corporation ahead of residents. Their responsibility is to govern the municipality in the public interest. Sound administration and service to the community belong together. But how do they manage a union staff of say 100 people if they have little or no management experience?

With six councillor seats available in 2026, I believe voters should examine the skills each candidate brings and how the resulting council would work as a team. Who can understand financial information? Who can assess a complex agreement? Who can communicate clearly, respect dissent and maintain independent judgment?

Regional governance changes and the debate over amalgamation add urgency to those questions. I use "probation" as a metaphor for electoral accountability, not as a claim that the province has formally placed Thorold on probation. I also cannot claim that amalgamation is a predetermined punishment for particular election results, or that provincial monitoring of councilor’s is planned. But it is not unreasonable to think it might.

For me, preserving Thorold's identity and autonomy requires capable, transparent government that residents can trust. That is why I regard this as our most important election. It is my assessment of what is at stake, not an established historical ranking. To me and others, the threat of amalgamation was a warning shot to fix our system or lose it.

Good people still need to be the right fit

I like Nella. I remember her community service, and I wish her good health and success. Those feelings do not settle whether she is one of the six best choices for the next council. That decision belongs to voters.

Politics may change people. Experience may strengthen them, harden them or encourage habits that deserve reconsideration. After two terms, it is reasonable to ask what a councillor has learned, what they would do differently and how they will demonstrate independent judgment in the next four years.

If Nella is re-elected, I hope she brings preparation, clear explanations and an openness to criticism. If she is not, I hope people acknowledge her service and wish her well. I would welcome her continuing contribution to community life and committees if she chooses that path.

My concern is the fit between the responsibilities ahead and the people we elect. We should expect competence, integrity and the willingness to question a proposal, even when the person presenting it is a friend or frequent ally. There are 6 candidates that fit the challenge. It’s the voters challenge to find them when they are right in front of us. That’s our responsibility as voters. Especially because in the opinion of those I trust and think are smart believe there are six competent councilor’s in this race that can do the job this term even though it will be five times harder than it ever was.

As constructive criticism, Nella was caught eating a few times on camera yes and from personal experiences she was terrible for call backs. Maybe this isn’t enough reason not to vote for her. The real test has to be more meaningful like with the new challenges our city is facing with amalgamation, does Nella and others have enough independent thinking and ability to think outside of the bloc to do the job when the region is downloading all kinds of extra responsibilities on Thorold councilors with the elimination of the regional council? Plus, on one of her last elections some paperwork she spelled Councillor incorrectly. Does this mean she shouldn’t get her council position renewed by voters? Again, not my call. Not to be petty, but all employees go through an evaluation of their effectiveness on the job. In this case it’s called an election.

Which six candidates can help Thorold make those repairs?

Sometimes repairing a system requires changing habits that have become comfortable. A friend once needed surgeons to break his leg so they could repair it properly. I offer that as a metaphor for reform, not a prescription for political destruction. Let me reframe the question. If the system has to be torn down and rebuilt which six candidates have the ability to tear it down and rebuild it to eliminate the threat of amalgamation with the region downloading all kinds of new responsibilities to the city?

Is there a doctor in the house?

Nicholas Bozza
Registered Third-Party Advertiser - City of Thorold
www.thoroldelectioncommentary.ca

Disclaimer: This article expresses my opinions and interpretations, informed by the public records cited, my recollections and conversations with Thorold residents. Questions about pressure, motives and voting patterns are questions, not findings of misconduct or improper coordination. Recalled remarks and accounts that have not been independently verified should be read with the qualifications stated in the article. Shared votes alone do not establish collusion. I welcome documented corrections. The views expressed are my own as a self-funded registered third-party advertiser.

Appendix: supporting charts

These charts are excluded from the article word count and reading estimate. Council controversies are not findings of wrongdoing by Nella. Unverified individual votes remain identified as such.

Chart 1: names used in election records

Election	Name I could verify
2018	Contemporary election coverage called her Nella Dekker. [4]
2022	Official results listed Nella Dekker (D’Epiro). [8]

Chart 2: disputed issues during both terms

Issue	Date / period	Her term	What made it controversial / outcome	Nella's verified involvement
Canada Games Park - financial commitment and operating risks	2019-2020	First	Debate over the initial conditional commitment of up to $7 million, future operating expenses and whether enough information was available before proceeding. [9]	Voted for proceeding with the partnership in December 2019. [1]
Canada Games Park - agreement transparency	May 2021	First	Approval of the consortium agreement triggered accusations of secrecy and censorship. Mayor Ugulini maintained that the process had been transparent. [2]	Individual vote not verified here.
Mayor and councillor pay increases during their own term	October 2020; effective September 2021	First	Disagreement over implementing higher compensation before the next council term. [10]	Supported implementing the increase during the existing term.
Jim Handley - conduct findings and penalties	2020-2021	First	Integrity commissioner findings concerning emails and social media resulted in an eight-month pay suspension. The investigation cost approximately $50,000; council also debated the penalties. [11]	Her individual vote not verified here.
Further integrity commissioner findings concerning Handley	December 2021	First	Another report found policy breaches and recommended further restrictions and sanctions. These were findings about Handley's conduct. [12]	Her individual response not verified here.
Fire Station 1 - deterioration and firefighter safety	December 2021	First	A fire chief's report identified asbestos, sewage and diesel-emission hazards, raising questions about the condition of the existing headquarters and replacement needs. [13]	No individual position verified here.
1970 Decew Road development - refusal and tribunal appeal	April 2022-November 2023	Both	Council refused zoning changes in 2022. The Ontario Land Tribunal subsequently allowed the development in 2023. [14]	Her individual vote not verified here.
Canada Games Park - unused ice, track access and financial reporting	2023	Second	Councillors questioned unused facilities, access restrictions, vacant space and the financial information provided to council. [15]	Her individual position on these operational questions not verified here.
Canada Games Park - rejection of an external legal opinion	October 3, 2023	Second	A motion seeking outside legal advice about the financials and consortium agreement was defeated 5-4. Supporters wanted further scrutiny; opponents questioned the need and expense. [6]	Voted against seeking the external legal opinion.
Allanburg townhouses at 2248 Centre Street	August 1, 2023	Second	Residents raised water-pressure and traffic-safety concerns. The revised ten-unit proposal received zoning approval 5-4. [5]	Voted for approval, alongside O'Hare, Sentance, De Divitiis and Ugulini.
Handley - convoy-related conduct findings and rejection of sanctions	June 2023	Second	Council rejected recommended sanctions following integrity commissioner findings related to his 2022 Ottawa convoy participation. [16]	Absent for the sanctions vote.
Partners for Climate Protection program	March-June 2024	Second	Public and council debate over remaining in the climate program; council ultimately withdrew. [17]	Her individual vote not verified here.
Upper's Lane extension and developer disputes	December 2024-January 2025	Second	Council debated whether to continue negotiations amid developer disagreements and concerns about staff time and legal costs. It imposed a January 31 deadline for agreement. [18]	Her individual position not verified here.

Issue	Date / period	Her term	What made it controversial / outcome	Nella’s verified involvement
Council size - eight councillors versus six	2025-2026	Second	Disagreement over efficiency, representation and governance reform. The province approved Thorold’s request to reduce council to six councillors. [19]	Her individual votes not verified here.
Centre 50+ parking expansion near Memorial Park	2025	Second	Residents challenged the effects on green space and heritage, consultation, transparency and the evidence of parking need. Centre representatives argued additional parking was necessary for seniors. [20]	Her individual vote not verified here.
Lakeview Cemetery - Section A and Muslim burial accommodation	2025-June 2026	Second	Debate over opening Section A, accommodating religious burial requirements and offering relocation of an existing burial. Council rejected opening Section A and approved accommodation in already-open sections. [7]	Supported opening Section A with O’Hare, Sentance and De Divitiis; that motion lost 5-4.
Election events at the seniors centre	September 2026	Second	The City said candidate events at the municipally owned centre may have breached municipal policy. That was a reported concern, not an established finding of wrongdoing. [21]	No personal breach by Nella established in the source reviewed.

Source notes and draft checks

Numbered references apply to the article and appendix. The appendix retains the issues and verification limits from the supplied chart. This first draft is not an exhaustive review of council records.

1. Canada Games partnership, December 2019
https://www.thoroldtoday.ca/local-news/update-2-councillors-weigh-in-on-thorolds-partnership-1901797

2. Consortium agreement debate, May 2021
https://www.thoroldtoday.ca/local-news/thorold-city-councillors-in-heated-exchange-with-mayor-as-canada-summer-games-agreement-passes-3794439

3. Official 2022 election results
https://www.thorold.ca/council-administration/elections/election-2022/

4. 2018 election account and inaugural meeting date
https://www.thoroldtoday.ca/local-news/year-in-review-part-12-1191388

5. Allanburg approval, August 2023
https://www.thoroldtoday.ca/local-news/allanburg-townhouse-complex-divides-city-council-7358220

6. External legal opinion vote, October 2023
https://www.thoroldtoday.ca/local-news/city-council-closes-door-on-canada-games-park-investigation-7639427

7. Lakeview Cemetery vote, June 2026
https://www.thoroldtoday.ca/local-news/thorold-moves-to-accommodate-muslim-burials-at-lakeview-cemetery-12371294

8. www.thorold.ca
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14. Thorold News
https://www.thoroldtoday.ca/local-news/icymi-controversial-thorold-development-to-move-forward-7847921

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https://www.thoroldtoday.ca/local-news/canada-games-park-management-grilled-by-thorold-city-council-6842804

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https://www.thoroldtoday.ca/local-news/climate-change-skeptics-voice-opposition-during-council-debate-8470868

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https://www.thoroldtoday.ca/2026-municipal-election-news/city-of-thorold-says-election-events-at-seniors-centre-may-have-breached-municipal-policy-12819342