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MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

From invisible fixer to mayoral challenger: Rob Cooper steps out from behind the curtain

The newcomer councillor, a veteran corporate problem-solver, wants to transform Hamilton in four years or less.

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Mayoral candidate Rob Cooper in conversation with Hamilton Spectator reporter Jon Wells, at The Donut Diner on Stone Church Road East.

Alejandro Gomez Garcia/The Hamilton Spectator

By Jon Wells Reporter

Mayor's race

This is a series of profiles on the three main candidates for mayor of Hamilton in the Oct. 26 municipal election.

- [Keanin Loomis is taking his second shot at Hamilton mayor](#)
- [Andrea Horwath chose to run again despite online 'ugliness'](#)

He prided himself on his career as the hired gun, parachuting into organizational crises and working in the background negotiating, problem solving.

He suggests few knew he was the one behind the curtain pulling levers and then blowing town.

“I was like the wind. People felt me, but they never saw me.”

So why is that guy all smiles for a meetup with a journalist at the venerable Donut Diner on Stone Church Road East?

His name is [Rob Cooper](#), and he’s running for mayor — the polar opposite, it seems, of the corporate-fixer invisible man.

“I’m not transactional, I’m more relationship-based, it always feels good meeting people,” Cooper says over coffee, which he takes with milk and honey. “Doing four to nine (campaign) events a day, people say that must exhaust you — it actually invigorates me. I absolutely love it.”



Spectator reporter Jon Wells weighs in on what surprised him while interviewing Hamilton's frontrunning mayoral candidates.

It’s not Cooper’s first foray into politics. He won a [byelection last year](#) for Ward 8 councillor. And for many years he worked on the side as an organizer for Ontario’s PC party — what he calls a “hobby.”

But running for the top job in Canada’s tenth largest city?

“As much as I feel I was called to what I was doing (in business), now that I’ve stepped into this world, this actually feels like what I was called to.”

Born in 1967, Cooper’s first home was in Hamilton’s core, on West Avenue North at King William Street, a couple of doors down from Central Gospel Tabernacle, a Pentecostal church his family attended.



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Not long after the church was destroyed by fire in 1970 — the cause was arson — they moved to Britannia Avenue in the east end.

His father, Pat, worked at Stelco, along with several uncles. His mother, Marion, was a stay-at-home mom. He has a younger sister.

The Coopers next lived near Hunter Street West and Poulette Street, and finally the east Mountain, where he attended Sherwood high school.

Cooper played football on the defensive line for the Saints. After breaking his right hand on the field, he had to take his exams dictating into a tape recorder because he couldn't write.

He started to get serious about his grades around that time, in Grade 12.

"I thought, I am not going to be a professional football player. I need to try a different path."

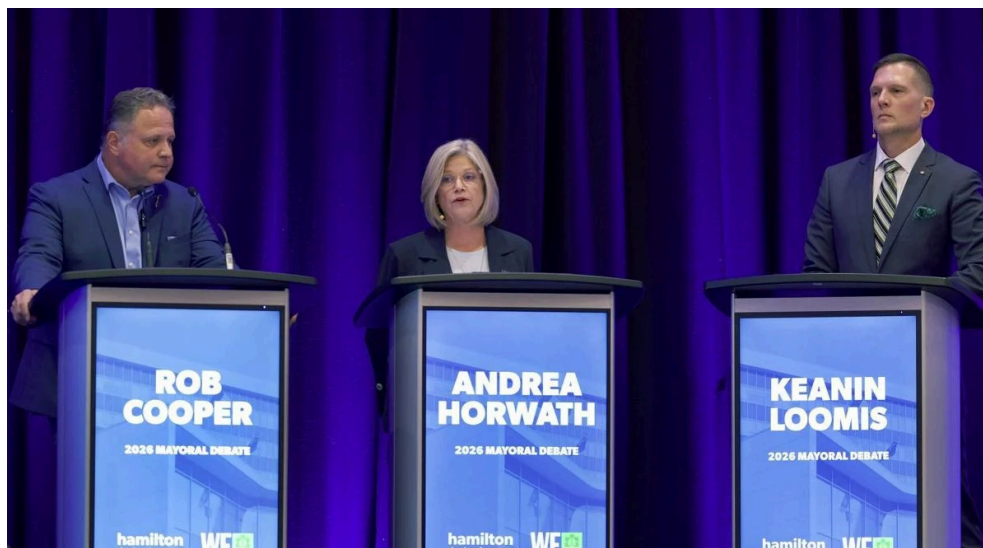
Longtime political organizer

Around that same time, in 1985, Cooper got involved in volunteering along with his mother for a municipal election campaign by longtime East Mountain councillor Tom Jackson, who attended their church.

Cooper eventually joined the Hamilton Mountain Ontario Progressive Conservative riding association, ultimately becoming president. (In 2015, Cooper was a regional organizer who helped secure Tory votes for Patrick Brown in a successful run for the Ontario PC Party leadership.)

He cites Ronald Reagan as a political influence. The conservative icon was president of the U.S. for two terms in the 1980s, through Cooper's teens.

"Reagan captured my attention when I was younger. He talked the language of the normal average person — he resonated. He was the most powerful orator, and then also Barack Obama when he came along."



Rob Cooper, at left, with fellow mayoral candidates Andrea Horwath and Keanin Loomis, during a debate at Carmen's Banquet Centre Sept. 22.

Cathie Coward/The Hamilton Spectator

During the first Hamilton mayoral debate last month, Cooper said voters should ask if they are "better off now than four years ago." It was a [signature line](#) of Reagan's, but Cooper says he had no idea.

"It was something I had started to ask people — did your life get better? It's like there is a drift, and all of a sudden people wake up and say, how did I get here from there?"

When asked if his longtime PC allegiances would compromise his ability to be a non-partisan mayor, Cooper says he suspended his party affiliations when he was elected councillor.

"In municipal politics you have to be able to work with everybody. I have to work with (PC Premier) Doug Ford. I have to work with (Liberal Prime Minister) Mark Carney. I can work with anybody."

When asked about the campaign issue dearest to him, he cites taxation, and "No. 2 is violent crime."

Rookie councillor or corporate veteran?

Over the course of an interview lasting more than one hour at the diner, he is animated, answering every question posed.

But he turned down repeated invitations to meet with The Hamilton Spectator's editorial board to answer questions in-person and face scrutiny over election promises, issues raised by readers and campaign pronouncements. Candidates Andrea Horwath and Keanin Loomis accepted.



Rob Cooper (navy shirt and jacket behind the podium) celebrates his victory in the 2025 byelection for Ward 8 with friends and family. His parents and younger sister live in Hamilton.

The Hamilton Spectator file photo

The reason, Cooper says, is he feels he has not always been portrayed fairly in Spec stories. One example of what he says is “bias” against him, is articles referencing him as a “rookie councillor” as a thumbnail description, in contrast to Loomis, often portrayed as a business leader in articles.

“(The Spectator) is trying to frame me in a certain way in the community,” he says. “So when you ask about coming to the editorial board, I’m like, why do you want to sit with me? It’s just a waste of my time.”

Looking back on his career path in the business world, Cooper says an early influence on his thinking was the book “What Color is Your Parachute?” by [Richard Bolles](#), an Anglican minister in the U.S. turned career-guidance author.

“He says to be a career maker, not a job taker,” says Cooper. “I wondered, what does that look like, what is my dream job? And it was this idea of transforming organizations.”

Cooper holds an MBA from McMaster University and is a chartered professional accountant. He lists [multiple designations](#) on his LinkedIn profile — certifications granted by bodies other than universities — as well as executive programs completed through prestigious universities in the U.S. and Europe.

What explains his drive to check so many resumé boxes?

“It’s because of what I chose to do for a living. I need to be credible. How can you be hired as a chief internal auditor (at McMaster University) if you don’t have the designations to make yourself credible?”

Type-A personality?

“I see myself as pragmatic. I just think, when I show up, I want to be authentic.”

He says he worked for six years at McMaster in positions including chief risk officer and chief strategy officer. He also points to past roles at TD Bank, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board and Stelco.

Cooper says he was appointed as vice-president finance treasurer by Stelco to help the steelmaker save worker pensions, and the company, when it was entering bankruptcy protection.

He says he raised half-a-billion dollars in fewer than 30 days — an oft-repeated campaign claim that has spurred questions and criticism from some past Stelco leaders interviewed for a separate story, who argue the candidate is exaggerating his role.

Did he do it all by himself?

“No, no — here’s the thing, when I talk about the things I did, it’s always an entire organization,” Cooper said. “Did I write the agreement? No, but I was the catalyst who was negotiating, along with executive oversight of course.”

He recalls the late Stelco chief financial executive Bill Vaughan telling him: “You’ve got 30 days, make sure you throw strikes and nobody hits it out of the park.”

Cooper says given the intensity of the negotiations, he didn’t sleep for three days — not the first or last time he’d be locked in for marathon stretches like that.

“It was my calling, and I enjoyed it. When things are normal, nine-to-five operations, I can’t get fired up about that. But when it’s a crisis, and there’s a need to transform, I can’t wait to get out of bed in the morning.”

Bits and bites

Favourite view in Hamilton: “When I worked at Stelco, I was in the Stelco Tower in a corner office, and through all that glass it overlooked the harbour and on late nights in winter, you’d see it starting to snow, and still see some of the boats in the harbour. It was absolutely beautiful.”

Favourite TV or movie that features Hamilton: “I really don’t watch TV. If you asked me what my favourite movie is, it’s ‘The Shawshank Redemption.’ It captivated me.”

Least favourite street to drive on in Hamilton: “Hunter... I go five or ten kilometres down the street and the whole vehicle shakes. When Barton Street gets off the list, it’s got to be no. 1.”

Best event you ever attended in Hamilton: “I attended Game 3 of the Canada Cup (at Copps Coliseum) when Gretzky passed to Lemieux and he put it in the top corner in overtime. I still have the tickets.”

Last time you were in Jackson Square and why: “To see my good friend Colin Millar, with the law firm Millar, Alexander. Lincoln Alexander and Colin’s father started the firm. We do lunch.”

Favourite Hamilton-born celebrity: “Shai (Gilgeous-Alexander). He’s the best at what he does.”

No. 1 reason Hamilton is better than Toronto: “Hamilton is a hub...You can go to Buffalo, or to wine country, or Stratford, or Toronto. It is a natural hub. Toronto is not.

Favourite Hamilton music act: “Growing up, I loved Teenage Head. And currently, I’m a big fan of Tom Wilson, we went to the same high school.”

Favourite off the beaten path greasy spoon: “The Egg and I for breakfast, back in the day. But it all comes down to your definition of greasy spoon. I’m also a big fan of The Attic (pizza parlour), I’m not sure if that fits the definition.”

No time for pets, or regrets

Such work is not conducive to family life, and while Cooper has a partner, he has never married or had children. He has six nieces and nephews through his sister — “and that is wonderful.”

Does he have regrets?

“I never lived a life of regrets. It’s not productive, and I’m making the best decision I can in the moment I’m living in. I never second guess it. More information could come along, where you say hey, you might make a different decision going forward, but I never looked back.”

Sometimes, working on the road, he flew back to Hamilton on weekends just to feel a home connection. Back on the road, he’d book the same hotel room, keep the layout the same — “for some sort of normalcy.”

Cooper loves the outdoors, hiking, being around water. He has a passion for oil paintings — more recently acrylics — that hang in his house, where he lives alone.

He can’t remember the last time he turned on his TV.

He has no pets. He has joked that he has a pet rock.

“But I really don’t,” he adds, laughs, and doubles down: “A pet rock named Rocky.”



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Alejandro Gomez Garcia/The Hamilton Spectator

Will his political life resemble his high-flying business career?

As much as he has loved campaigning for mayor — “When this is over, I’m going to miss it” — if he wins, he suggests he will take a page from his past and not stick around long.

He references a Hamilton mayor who served six terms.

“A win for me is transforming Hamilton, and I’m not here to break Bob Morrow’s record. I’m here for a term, or two terms, but once the transformation is over, I’m done ... I tell people, give me Hamilton for four years — you won’t recognize it.”



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