



Meet Calgary's new mayor: Who is Jyoti Gondek?

From urban sociologist to city hall's top job.

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Oct 9, 2021

It was October 2019, and Calgary city council was deep into a debate on revisions to ward boundaries.

“I think I’m going to make Councillor Gondek’s head explode when I say this,” chuckled Councillor Gian-Carlo Carra. “Different parts of the city have different value sets and different challenges facing them.”

Carra’s point was that the central and suburban areas of the city are so different that they each deserve distinct representation on council.

Gondek, who has a PhD in urban sociology, fought back—saying it was “offensive” to suggest suburban councillors were less values-oriented than inner-city ones.

“You know what? A lot of people choose to situate in environments where they can afford to buy a house. A lot of people choose to situate in environments where their family and social network is around.”

She pointed to the failure of “councils like this one” to deliver on promises made to outer communities. “Do you know how hard we have to work in the periphery wards to get the things that are taken for granted in your wards?”

Thoroughly dressed down, Carra apologized.

The exchange showcased Gondek's political persona. As a decades-long resident of north central Calgary, and on city council, she's been a dogged advocate for the interests of her ward—and she has no tolerance for condescension, whether personal or geographical.

The three most prominent mayoral candidates have all rejected being labelled as right-wing or left-wing, conservative or progressive. Instead, Gondek, Jeromy Farkas and Jeff Davison have preferred to speak in terms of flexibility and moderation, doing what's best for the people rather than pursuing an ideological agenda.

But what one thinks is best for the people depends on one's politics and worldview.

In her four years as councillor, Gondek has championed the Green Line, supported police reform and has repeatedly taken on Jason Kenney's provincial government, decrying it as "soulless." She supported reducing the default speed limit in the city to 40 km/h.

She also supported the Flames arena deal in 2019, and voted with the majority of council to approve 14 new communities on the city's outskirts—a decision that undermined the city's growth and climate plans.

Now, describing herself as a centrist, she's running for mayor.

From across the pond to Calgary city council

Born in London, U.K., to Punjabi parents from India, Gondek was four years old when her family came to Canada. She grew up in Manitoba, frequently moving to new towns due to her father's work with the provincial government's land claims office.

"He would always say, 'You've got to pay attention to [politics], these things will shape your future,'" Gondek told *The Sprawl*. "'You need to have a hand in shaping your future.' I remember he always said that, and I just kind of ignored it."

After earning her sociology degree at the University of Manitoba, Gondek moved to Alberta with her husband Todd. She quickly started volunteering, taking on various roles with her community association. When her father

died suddenly in 2003, not long after her parents had moved to Calgary, Gondek felt a duty to follow through on his unfinished projects in the Punjabi community.

“I connected with some of his friends in Calgary,” she recalled. “And I helped them get Punjabi recognized as a second language option in the CBE.”

She worked in marketing for credit unions and Greyhound Canada before starting her own consultancy firm. At the same time, she got her master’s degree in organizational sociology—with a focus on corporate social responsibility—before getting her PhD in urban sociology in 2013.

She’s not somebody who sits in the corner.

Byron Miller, University of Calgary professor

Amid all this, Gondek sat on numerous boards and committees, including four years as a citizen member of the city’s planning commission from 2012 to 2016 while she taught at the University of Calgary.

James Stauch worked alongside Gondek during this time on a civic innovation project called Vivacity, where Gondek was a mentor and expert resource for students. Stauch, who is director of the Institute for Community Prosperity at Mount Royal University, recalls Gondek impressing students with the depth of her knowledge on issues like poverty, homelessness and food insecurity.

“I think that came as kind of a pleasant surprise to students thinking, ‘Oh, here comes a real estate expert—who’s actually also really knowledgeable on social issues,’” said Stauch.

“[She’s] pretty thoughtful about how those two mesh together: how the social and the economic kind of reinforce each other.”

Byron Miller crossed paths with Gondek when they were both appointed to a task force meant to advise city council on how to create a framework for community input into planning decisions. Miller, a professor of geography and urban design at the University of Calgary, knew that she’d been well-

regarded as a PhD student in sociology. (He'd read her dissertation, later citing it in one of his publications.)

On the task force, Miller got a sense of Gondek as a person.

"She advocates her position strongly," he said. "She doesn't really back down but she certainly listens to others. She's not somebody who sits in the corner."

In 2017, Gondek stepped down from the task force to run for the Ward 3 council seat vacated by Jim Stevenson, for whom she had previously been a campaign manager.

"It wasn't that I wanted to be a politician, I wanted to be a city builder," Gondek said. "I followed that path for 10 years. And then when I determined that all my work in the community on various boards and committees was not able to influence the decision makers in the way I had hoped—that's when I took the plunge."

Challenging how urban sprawl is understood

In a city where many developers have made fortunes expanding suburban areas during boom years, Gondek's history with the development industry has raised questions since she entered politics.

In 2013, the Urban Development Institute (UDI)—"the voice of the development community in Calgary"—hired Gondek's company, Tick Consulting, to help reframe how urban sprawl is perceived in Calgary.

At the time, the UDI ran a website (www.votecalgary.ca) to influence public discourse before the 2013 election and provide "a voice to industry concerns."

At issue in Gondek's research for the UDI were two words in particular: "sprawl" and "suburbs."

Gondek argued that neither word described what developers were building in Calgary. Sprawl, she said, describes growth that is uncontrolled and unplanned. "In our opinion, it's simply not the case for Calgary," she told the *Calgary Herald*.

And suburbs? They were an “American concept” describing growth outside a municipality’s borders. “Calgary’s so-called suburbs are actually a part of the city—there’s nothing ‘sub’ about them,” she said.

In her first term on council, Gondek has also sought to reframe the way growth on the city’s perimeter is understood.

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Jyoti Gondek in 2013

After Gondek voted with the majority of city council to approve 14 new communities in the summer of 2018—going well above the eight originally recommended by city admin, and provoking significant public backlash—Gondek took issue with them being constantly described as “14 new communities.”

She argued that some of the new approvals were better understood as completing existing communities on the city's periphery, including those in her ward.

“A lot of that ‘14 new communities’ rhetoric misses the fact that we are putting in amenities—and commercial and retail areas—in places that have traditionally been residential only,” Gondek told *The Sprawl* in 2019. “So we're helping people actually have complete communities. But that gets missed when we only talk about approving ‘14 new communities.’”

Developing questions

Gondek’s university work also intersected with the development industry. From 2014 to 2017, Gondek was director of the Westman Centre for Real Estate Studies at the University of Calgary’s Haskayne School of Business.

It was founded in 2013 with a \$5 million donation from its namesake, Jay Westman, CEO of local developer Jayman BUILT.

Westman is listed as a donor to Gondek's 2021 campaign, as is developer Cal Wenzel, who was infamously recorded in 2013 describing a plan to use the deep pockets of the industry to ensure a developer-friendly city council.

Also listed as Gondek donors: Wayne Chiu, founder and CEO of Trico Homes; Peter Livaditis of LaCaille Group; and former Calgary Herald publisher Guy Huntingford, who now sits on the board of a commercial real estate development association.

(Farkas lists "C. Wenzel," "J. Westman," and "P. Livaditis" as donors, and Westman and Wenzel's son Shane appear on Davison's list. Chiu and Huntingford do not appear on their lists. None of the donors responded to requests for confirmation.)

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Jyoti Gondek in 2019

As reported by *LiveWire Calgary*, contributions from developers made up 47% of Gondek's financial disclosures from her 2017 campaign. Farkas and Davison's ratios were 37% and 36%, respectively, close to the average among councillors of 35%.

Gondek told *The Sprawl* that donations do not change her approach to decision-making. She describes her relationship with developers as instructive for her approach to political problem-solving.

"I found that there was this incredibly antagonistic relationship between the land-development industry and the city," she recalled about her experience as a consultant. "So, as someone who specialized in consulting in social responsibility, I tried to figure out a way to make that relationship more collaborative—and focused on building the best communities for the people that both parties need to serve."

Asked if there is an inherent tension between the best interests of Calgarians and developers, Gondek frames the question in larger terms.

“I would say it’s the whole capitalist dilemma: Why are you doing what you’re doing? Is it to serve the best interests of your shareholder, or is it to serve the best interests of all stakeholders?” she said.

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Jyoti Gondek

“I can tell you that there are a lot of people in the land development industry who are good folks trying to do good work, and sometimes our internal processes and policies at the city aren’t allowing them to deliver the best possible product.”

“And I can tell you there are members of industry who are stuck in the ways of the past, where they will say things like, ‘Well, the market won’t bear that.’ And my comment back is, ‘Well, you can shape the market. The market is you and me.’”

A push to low-key make history

Like many politicians seeking to occupy the political centre, Gondek sometimes seems to be gesturing to the left and the right simultaneously.

Her platform names eight issues she is focused on, including building the Green Line, investing in the arts, and renegotiating the city’s financial relationship with the province. It also calls Calgarians “investors” for choosing to live here. Asked if this phrasing might seem exclusionary, Gondek said she wants to reclaim “the language of investment” from the financial sector.

Druh Farrell, who isn’t standing for re-election in Ward 7, has known Gondek since well before the latter’s foray into politics.

“She’s a compassionate human being who cares about the well-being of Calgarians—and not just the people who normally have the power around the council table, which is often people who have affluence and influence,” said Farrell.

“What I’ve noticed as a co-worker is she’s brave, she’s smart, she knows the issues, she’s extremely qualified, the best-qualified among the [mayoral] candidates,” said Farrell.

All 27 mayoral candidates were recently asked by CTV to name a Calgarian they admire. Gondek named Virnetta Anderson, her predecessor as Ward 3 representative by four decades and the first Black woman on city council.

There has been no shortage of racist and misogynistic abuse directed at Gondek and other candidates during the campaign. Yet somehow the history-making quality of a possible Gondek victory almost seems like a footnote to the mainstream coverage and discourse. It certainly hasn’t been a centrepiece of her campaign.

Gondek prefers it that way.

“I am running because I’m qualified, I have the experience, I have the character to do this job—and I want people to understand that as the primary reason I’m running,” she said.

“That’s how we start to normalize women and people of colour being in decision-making positions.”

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Druh Farrell, outgoing Ward 7 councillor

Nevertheless, electing a qualified mayor who happens to be a woman of colour to succeed a qualified mayor who happens to be a man of colour would be a significant event for a city that, since its incorporation in 1884, has only elected nine racialized people and never elected a woman as mayor.

Gondek understands this. She may not want race to be front and centre in the campaign, but racism is, in part, behind her decision to run. In particular, she recalls a rally last December against pandemic restrictions where white supremacist groups like the Proud Boys and Soldiers of Odin openly marched.

“That made me even more convinced that I should run for mayor,” she said. “That cannot be accepted in our city. And if it takes a woman of colour running for mayor to show them they have no place here, then I’m all in.”

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