

BROCK'S BANTER: Pull up a Chair

By Brock Weir

I have always loved the phrase "arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic." It is one of those phrases that says so much in very few words. It paints a vivid picture, there's a sense of high drama, all of this tempered with a sense of futility and giving way to the inevitable.

There are few opportunities these days to see an example of this unfold before your very eyes, so I am thankful I sat in on the very lengthy Regional Council meeting last Thursday on whether or not our representatives wanted the public at large to vote for their Chair.

It was clear from the outset that the 21 people around the table had very strong opinions on the subject, as did the half-dozen residents from Aurora, Markham and Newmarket who came forward to sound off.

Some delegates said electing a Chair would lead to increased accountability and transparency at the Regional level, leading those sitting on the other side of the divide to feign indignation at the comment, questioning "as has become tradition" whether saying accountability and transparency should be increased directly implies that things are not currently accountable and transparent.

Other delegates were open and transparent with their desire to pepper the conversation with a "gotcha!" moment by calling Regional Councillors "thieves in the night" if they denied York Region residents the vote for a leader. Hey, they were her own words "both the 'gotcha' and the 'thieves' remark, but they caused Regional Council to understandably get into something of a lather.

More delegates tried to invoke the spirit of the Remembrance Day just passed to invoke sympathy to their side, saying our fighting men and women put their lives on the line for our democratic principles. That might be true, but I highly doubt they had the head of a Region that has only existed for 41 years in mind when they headed over to the Front.

Exchanges between Councillors and delegates scratched barely-healed wounds sustained during the 2014 Municipal Election, sparked talks of a safety valve whereby the appointed Chair can cast the deciding vote in a tie and even, believe it or not, a discussion of where one can find the best espresso in the Region.

In short, it was a mess "and it ultimately led nowhere with a vote delayed until a convenient date in January or February.

It truly was like watching someone re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. By the time the matter comes up for debate at Regional Council again, there is a very real chance the Province of Ontario will have already made the decision on behalf of York. As Regional Councillor John Taylor of Newmarket said, they will have "abdicated" their opportunity to weigh in on the matter.

MENTAL GYMNASTICS

Whether or not they were trying to avoid making a decision, letting their views on the matter be fully known to the people who put them in their respective seats, or delaying what is ultimately going to come so they can play the victim when a decision is foisted upon them, they have made their beds.

To those sitting in the audience, it seemed like they were doing just about everything in their power to twist themselves into a bind from bogging down the conversation with irrelevant nonsense or attempting to completely change the motion before them so it was a veritable omnibus motion that had more of a chance of coming back to Regional Council by February as Donald Trump has winning the Nobel Peace Prize.

Take, for example, this one interjection from Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti:

"Do you not find it somewhat [hypocritical] of the Province that they are trying to impose this on the Region where they don't do it for their leader, or for the country's leader?" he asked. "Should the Premier and the Prime Minister not follow suit?"

I understand the sentiment, but that question would have made far more sense had the Region a parliamentary system of government complete with party lines. Federally and Provincially-speaking you go into an election with a clear idea of the leader you are going to get with your vote. The leader of the majority-getting party is not decided after the fact by those lucky enough to be elected. It is clear what you're getting when you're casting the vote.

"But they started it!?", as Mayor Scarpitti said, (no, really) is not reason enough to demand similar changes on the Provincial level.

RIDING THE OMNIBUS

What initially started off as a simple motion on whether or not Regional Council supported the legislation brought forward by MPP Chris Ballard quickly began to morph as the clock ticked through the conversation. Soon enough, the vote began to teeter on the merits of overhauling it into a wholesale review of how Regional government itself is structured.

For one, knowing the speed of government, that being ready by February has a snowball's chance.

Secondly, it binds together two very different discussions which merit individual consideration and thorough debate.

Although I agree with the notion of electing a chair for the Region of York, personally I do not sense the urgency of it. The Chair is, of course, just one vote. Having a direct say on who is going to be steering the ship is welcome, but I have many questions on how such a vote would shake down in the process. Obviously one or more people will put their name forward for the job and their names will be on the ballot accordingly, but will there be debates and meetings in all nine York Region municipalities so residents can familiarize themselves with those in the running?

Salary aside, will having just one vote be enticement enough to spend all the money on a decent campaign, or should there ultimately be more power invested in the Chair should the position become elected?

Mayor Dawe supported the motion for the governance review and I think that is a much more pressing matter. Many around the table spoke out about the need for communities like Aurora, King, and East Gwillimbury to have more than one voice joining them at the table and that is an issue which the public can get behind. It would certainly have more of a direct impact on our day to day lives.

After last Tuesday's Special Council meeting we know the majority of Aurora's elected representatives, with the exception of Mayor Dawe, support electing a Regional Chair. But the Region has now essentially let that ship sail in lieu of making a decision on behalf of their constituents.

This could be motivation enough for residents to get behind further voices at the table representing their interests.