

BROCK'S BANTER: Reefer Madness

By Brock Weir

It will have to be a good long while before I complain about a 'boring' Council meeting again.

Monday's meeting at which Aurora opted in to retail cannabis sales turned out to be the most heated, and ultimately raucous meeting I have seen unfold in Council Chambers in several years.

Admittedly, I was slightly distracted when all hell broke loose.

By the time Councillor Gallo made it clear he was opting in, I was on my laptop laying the groundwork for this week's front page story, as his decision ultimately being the deciding vote, tipping the Council majority in favour of retail cannabis sales after Councillor Thompson bowed out of the debate due to his day job with a major Canadian pharmacy retailer.

At that point, Mayor Mrakas, and Councillors Humfries, Gilliland and Gallo were in, so the debate was won, and although there were a few mutterings from the 200-strong crowd, few seemed to take notice until Councillor Gaertner opened her mouth and somehow sparked the melee.

There have been times when people in the audience have loudly voiced their opinions to local lawmakers, if they happened to be in the opposite camp, but this was something different. People on both sides of the debate were up on their feet, taking their frustrations out on each other. They were also taking it out on Council members, who had to leave the chamber until the ruckus died down.

With municipal staff standing by to lend some semblance of control to the atmosphere, the sparring match continued for about five minutes, with one member of the opt-in crowd telling some of the opt-outs that Council had made their decision and to 'go home.' The other side ramped up their own rhetoric by stating that their voices were democracy in action and there would be something of a reckoning come 2022 when they will speak up once again at the ballot box.

All too often Council ' and I am speaking of Council generally, not specifically the Council Aurora elected this past October ' is accused of making decisions in the interests of political expediency; that is, based on the prevailing opinion of those filling Council Chambers, holding their feet to the fire.

That was certainly not the case in this instance and, in my opinion, Council should be commended for letting common sense prevail over the stacked deck they faced in the room on Monday night.

It must be said that many members of the vocal majority who took to the podium this week had some valid points. There are many unanswered questions out there from the higher levels of government when it comes to regulation, as well as how municipalities will benefit from the revenues generated by cannabis sales and the inherent flaws that come with public polling. Several delegates, however, offered Chicken Little scenarios that just didn't hold water. They also expounded on moral issues regarding recreational cannabis use which was really a debate for another day ' another day in, say, 2015 when the incoming Federal Government made its goals clear.

Arguments were made that allowing retail pot sales would make a 'health risk' more convenient, that recreational cannabis being legal doesn't make it right, arguments casting doubt on the positive impact retail sales in Aurora might have on stamping out the black market, the impact that allowing retail cannabis sales might somehow have an adverse hit on property values, that the Bible might help fill some sort of void for cannabis users, and that it will move the Doomsday clock forward by a minute.

Okay, that last argument on the Doomsday Clock wasn't actually made, but it would not have been out of place in the flow of Monday night's conversation.

'We will be known as 'Pot Town', said one resident. 'What conservative family would want to live here?'

'How can I promote Aurora to my clients?' said another, citing perceived hits to both the local housing market, as well as the attractiveness of private schools, which are often seen as a magnet for students from wealthy families from abroad.

Well, it has been a few weeks since the City of Toronto opted in to retail cannabis sales and I have yet to see the Don Valley Parkway and 400 flooded by a mass exodus of people, conservative or otherwise, fleeing the urban centre for the 'burbs to escape the devil's lettuce.

It was heartening to hear many Council members state clearly on Monday night that they were not prepared to let emotion get in the way of making the logical decision. That has not always been the case with Councils-gone-by, and this was a refreshing change of pace.

'Nothing we do here this evening will change the fact that cannabis is legal,' said Mayor Mrakas. 'A decision to opt out will not magically reduce the use of cannabis in our community, it will just limit one avenue for our residents to have access to legal, federally regulated product and force them to drive 15 minutes down the road to Stouffville or Bradford while, at the same time cut

off access to tax revenue that our community will need to address enforcement issues.?

Added Councillor Gallo: ?It is a regulated legal product and how can I sit here and say no to having a legal, regulated product being sold in a retail store? I have difficulty with that.?

So too, I suspect, did what one of the six ?opt in? delegates described as ?the silent majority.?

I have, on occasion, taken the opportunity afforded to me in this space to lament that, in recent years, Aurora has fallen behind the curve in comparison to Newmarket when it comes to taking the initiative to bring progressive ideas to fruition. It was high time to turn the tide and, in my opinion, this was a step in the right direction.

?The Town of Newmarket will be taking a measured approach to this topic and will review and revisit Council's decision in a year's time,? said Newmarket Mayor John Taylor after his Council voted to opt out last week. ?By then, we hope to have more information will be available and we are able to learn from the experiences of municipalities that have opted in.?

It is unclear from the statement exactly what information they hope to obtain in twelve months' time. Unless there's a change in Federal Government this year, a new government that will dramatically blow the smoke in another direction, cannabis will be just as legal in a year, and cigarettes and alcohol will be, for better or worse, just as legal as they are today.

The only difference is that opt in municipalities will be able to share in the wealth generated from it, while opening up significant possibilities for local business.