

BROCK'S BANTER: Smoother than a stale jar of Skippy

By Brock Weir

Don't believe them? Just watch.

Every once in a while I have the itch to watch a Council meeting, or similar public spectacle, from outside the confines of the press box.

Late last fall, I was sitting in the press box for the thrilling conclusion of whether or not York Region Councillors would like to elect their Chair. For the entire time of the lengthy meeting, I was sitting on the edge of my seat waiting for the climax to come: a deferral to this month, in a move that shocked absolutely no one. As the scene unfolded, however, I had the pleasure of a running commentary from the Region's answer to Statler and Waldorf in my right ear.

"Of course he would!," said Statler who, in my mind's eye, was throwing up his hands in exasperation, when one of the team of 21 elected members did something presumably exasperating. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of turning around to watch his arms flapping around in the breeze, but the breeze on the back of my neck was telling.

"IDIOTS!" exclaimed his compatriot in heckledom.

They found themselves in a lather and wasted no time in rinsing and repeating throughout the three hour meeting, to the point where my colleague from another newspaper turned around to comment on their rudeness. She was right, of course, but let's be real: it was more entertaining, and more raw, than what was unfolding on the dais.

That was an exciting week overall.

If I hadn't been so entertained by their antics, and if there had been a lull in the debate, I would have turned my mind back to a discussion around our own Council table earlier that week.

Aurora's lawmakers launched into their semi-annual marathon talks about how many trees Aurora residents should be able to cut down on their own property.

It is a debate that invariably brings out the tears, snark, an unusual amount of theatrics and enough talk about trunk girth to make Sue Johansen blush.

"Has anyone seen that movie Groundhog Day?" asked Councillor Michael Thompson at the time.

That's when I wished I was sitting in the public gallery.

Basically, I had to sit on my hands lest I yell out, "Yes! Yes! Oh, God, YES!"

(Sue: I'll have what he's having.)

When dead horses are on the brink of being ground into a smooth, buttery paste, sometimes you need to let it all out. In my case, that had to come later. I had to stick to the task at hand through repeated and reheated arguments over why the tree bylaw should be tightened up. Or not. Rehashed arguments on why golf courses ? apparently the last bastion of wildlife preservation in our ever-changing world, or so the story goes from some people ? should be exempt from the Town's tree protection bylaw.

Slide presentations-cum-neighbourhood travelogues with Councillor Abel. The detailed history of Mayor Dawe's admitted ineptitude when it comes to his own landscaping prowess.

On and on it went. And on and on it goes.

By the time last November rolled around, it was clear few people were actually following this endless debate.

When Council first got the ball rolling on this discussion in the previous Council term, the place was packed with concerned residents who groaned and cheered as they saw fit, there were delegations galore, and no shortage of expert opinion. Last fall, just two people stuck around to soak in the rehash: the Executive Director of the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust and the couple who brought the issue of tree cutting on Beacon Hall Golf Course to Councillors' attention in the first place.

Even the golf course owners themselves seemed to have lost interest in the debate.

Yet, that November General Committee meeting agenda, the bulk of which pertained to trees (the value of, protection of, replacement of) ran just short of a whopping 300 pages. Considering every single report that has come out about this over the last three or four years, it probably accounts for a whole 2C's worth of pulp and paper, not to mention the reams that have been dedicated to the subject in local media.

Eventually, you get to a point where you almost feel complicit in the destruction when absolutely nothing new is being said.

So, when Councillors once again put on their spurs to saddle up their favourite hobby horse last week, a few remarks were made and Councillor Thompson, who happened to be chairing last week's General Committee meeting remarked, "I understand the local paper will not be reporting anything on this issue."

That is not strictly true (see: the 777 words preceding this paragraph) but in the lengthy discussion last week, which ran nearly 40 minutes, almost nothing new was said.

The possible exception were comments at the start of the meeting from Councillor Abel mentioning the fact he works for a golf course but, following advice, did not believe he had a pecuniary interest in the debate and, later on, Councillor Gaertner's challenge of that view.

This hasn't been discussed around the table in over two discussions on this very topic.

As of our press time this week, Council is to convene once again to see if they can make a decision one way or another on whether the tree bylaw needs to change, whether it should stay the same, and perennial discussion on whether all this has been trying to solve a problem that doesn't exist.

Personally, I will be curious to see just how many people turn out to this week's session to speak out one way or another or, if the dwindling attendance last fall indicates a general frustration at the lack of any movement whatsoever.

Ever the optimist, despite being disappointed oh-so-many-times, I am hoping ? and I am sure I am joined by people on both sides of this debate --- for some closure this week. I eagerly anticipate reporting in our February 18 edition that there have been some significant changes to the bylaw.

Or that the majority of Council has agreed to keep the status quo.

Something.

Anything.