

BROCK'S BANTER: The Championship Circle

By Brock Weir

Growing up in what was once the wilds of Newmarket, we had a fairly common weekday routine.

During the winter months, the alarm would go off while it was still dark outside, one would trundle downstairs for a bowl of cereal in front of the TV before getting ready for school.

Cereal was always the order of the day and the diet on TV was just as steady: the potent combo of Bewitched and I Dream of Jeannie, followed by Care Bears and the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. Yes, it was eclectic fare, but it always seemed to work to provide some get-up-and-go for someone too young to drink coffee.

From the time I was a kid, there was one episode of Bewitched that stuck out in my head. In this particular episode, Samantha takes on one of Derwood's clients, joining other local mothers in a battle to save a local park from development.

It wasn't the plot that stuck with me, but the mantra from the women Sam had to overcome: 'you can't fight city hall.'

Even at that age, I questioned why that phrase seemed ubiquitous in our culture. It didn't seem likely, yet as I grew up and became more conscious of the municipal, provincial and federal spheres, I saw with increasing alarm that people still held that adage to be true.

It was a disappointing realization; after all, we as residents elect our representatives.

Therefore, it is our fight. We pick our team and send them out, dukes up, to tackle the issue of the day. As the collective team captains, we theoretically had the ability to send our players into the corner, bench them, or give them a pat on the back.

As an observer of the municipal realm, I am glad to see the 'you can't fight city hall' state of mind is, in some respects, giving way to grassroots activism.

This is in evidence fairly often in the Council chamber, particularly when it is an issue that hits close to home, such as issues related to the safety of children, the ease in which one can get around Town, and, with the exception of budget meetings, how a particular decision might impact their bottom line.

However, if last week's General Committee meeting is any indication, there is still a fair bit of work to be done in order to consign the 'you can't fight city hall' mindset into the annals of history where it belongs.

'They said it was a lost cause for them, like it is a waste of their time,' said Kennedy Street resident Gilberto Pesegi on why his neighbours did not readily come forward to advocate for speed cushions, or any other form of traffic calming measure, on their busy southwest Aurora street. 'Some of them have been there for 30 or 40 years and nothing has been done.'

This insight into the attitudes apparently permeating the neighbourhood were concerning on several fronts. First, Kennedy Street West was just one of five streets being examined for a speed cushion pilot project with the balance representing just about every growing neighbourhood in Aurora and a public meeting on the subject brought out a whopping two residents.

Second, what Mr. Pesegi said is true, the apparently resigned attitudes of his neighbours is likely a reason as any why residents weren't exactly breaking down the doors of Town Hall to say whether or not they wanted speed bumps, humps, or cushions to control traffic on their streets.

But, going door-to-door, Mr. Pesegi said he found that the appetite for change on Kennedy Street was indeed there. When he went house to house with his petition he found there was a significant buy-in from his neighbours. Yet, surveys conducted by the Town demonstrated otherwise.

In the eyes of the Town's Department of Infrastructure, by going door-to-door, Mr. Pesegi has become what is termed as a 'community champion' to lead a survey process bringing information forward to municipal staff for further action. What he was able to do by going door-to-door achieved far more than a letter mailed out to residents in the area with a survey to be filled out and submitted back to Town Hall.

His results indicated the buy-in from the community far exceeds the 70 per cent threshold maintained by the Town that is the litmus test on whether or not such proposed changes have the required backing from the neighbourhood.

But, at the end of the day, why should projects such as these be contingent on residents like Mr. Pesegi to take time out of his or her workday to conduct surveys to affect change with an issue that is already winding its way through the halls of government?

It has been demonstrated decisively, time and time again, that these survey mail-outs just do not work, and they haven't in my over six years of covering municipal politics in the Town of Aurora. Yet, staff keep going back to the well, dusting off the old methodology, and relying on Canada Post and residents taking the time 'and finding the time' to complete a survey and send it back in order to gauge the pulse of the community.

If the old methodology is not working, it is not a matter of reinventing the wheel; it is a matter of dusting off an even older methodology: going out for a few hours, knocking on doors, ringing bells, and making the effort to have face-to-face interactions with the people who potentially impacted the most by whatever project hanging in the balance.

It shouldn't be left up to the residents to become 'champions' for a cause that has been put in motion by Council.

Councillor Tom Mrakas summed it up well last week:

'We all go door-to-door and we all know how difficult it is to go door-to-door,' he said. 'We all do it. We talk about communications and everything and I just think [by] sending out a letter, we're failing. It doesn't take long to pick a street, go out there, have staff go out there for one day for a couple of hours. I do it. It is not that long. Get the actual responses from the residents, come back here and we can have a true response of what is going on.'

By the end of last week's discussion, Councillor Gaertner pointed out that their decision to cast aside the recommendation to nix the speed cushion pilot on Kennedy Street and forge ahead with it was 'democracy in action' and that is indeed the case. Hopefully, this success is taken to heart by the residents of Kennedy Street, and dispels views held by so many and that you can indeed fight city hall.

But it's not the neighbours who should be entering the ring.