

## BROCK'S BANTER: Two-Way Streets

By Brock Weir

Look, with Oprah off the air as far as weekly TV is concerned, you have to learn how to take your epiphanies where you find them. You don't need Dr. Phil or any of her surrogates to tell you what's up; you just need to open your eyes, your ears and your mind. And, in the end, they often pop up where you least suspect it.

This past Saturday, for instance, I was walking around the Aurora Farmers' Market where I often go to grab a bite of weekend brunch before continuing the rounds. Sandwich in hand, I rounded the corner of Sasha's Sweets and something caught my eye. Bundled in a cardboard box behind the main fudge table was a crumpled up bag bearing multiple images of a familiar black and white face.

Taking a half-step into the booth just to be sure of the vision, I went for it.

?Are you a Lucille Ball fan?? I ventured to the woman seated behind the table, gesturing to her I Love Lucy-themed bag.

Indeed she was. What ensued was a brief conversation about Ms. Ball, I Love Lucy, the recent TV special which, 60 years after the fact, still proved I Love Lucy to be a ratings bonanza for CBS, and the upcoming Comedy Festival being held in her honour. This gets underway in August in Jamestown, New York, a relatively short drive from Buffalo.

Home at the end of a busy day, I went online to take a look at the latest scuttlebutt about the Festival in their own local media. It was the same old thing: opinion polls showing a complete lack of local interest in the festivities, complaints about the disruption it might cause, fatigue of their city hitching their wagon to the legacy of their most famous hometown girl and, in a familiar, yet still surprising refrain from a city, once an industrial powerhouse and now littered with empty storefronts, general concern about the onslaught of tourists to the otherwise peaceful, if slightly downtrodden burgh.

Nevertheless, Festival plans march on and, if last year's turnout is any indication, it will bring in thousands of visitors from all over the world.

It is a model that has been embraced by their lawmakers, setting themselves apart from the crowd and, indeed, it is a model that has been followed elsewhere.

Take a look at the historic Main Street of Unionville, for instance. While its fortunes have ebbed and flowed over the years, it has carved a niche for itself as a shopping destination and a haven for arts and culture. It's a branding exercise that has served them well over the decades and fostered many opportunities for like-minded people from far and wide.

Having lived there for a few years in the last decade, however, you get a mixed bag of reaction from people on the street on what it means to be a destination. People who live there, generally the ones who have lived there for a long time, seem to have a degree of resentment having to navigate through a sea of tourists and weekend shoppers once the warmer weather hits. Business owners, of course, sing a very different tune, thrilled that Unionville has been able to carve out a relatively unique shopping experience in York Region, one that evidently serves a niche the businesses are only too happy to fill.

The routes Unionville and indeed Jamestown have taken have made a significant impact on their respective business communities. Each direction they took was a conscious effort to do so, bringing in new people and introducing these newbies to all the wonderful things their municipalities have to offer.

Their efforts were not intended to necessarily provide their own townspeople with something fun and different to do on a lazy Saturday afternoon.

They complain about the adjustments that had to be made, the inconvenience ? real or imagined ? that it imposes on them, but their business owners are laughing all the way to the bank. Their patrons are laughing too, possibly all the way to the poorhouse, but laughing just the same.

At last week's Council meeting, a great deal of time was spent rehashing some of the more recent arguments made on each side of Mayor Dawe's interesting proposal for Yonge Street parking, whereby traffic would be reduced to one lane in each direction with the balance of space devoted to dedicated on-street parking and opportunities for businesses to ?pop out? onto the sidewalk to give them, among other opportunities, a chance to have some patio business.

When the Mayor first offered this proposal, I have to admit my own skepticism. Reducing traffic to one lane each way seemed like a recipe to make a bad situation at Yonge and Wellington worse.

However, as I considered the Unionville and Jamestown examples hand in hand with some of the comments made at last week's session, I began to reconsider my own position.

?Last week, there were a few business owners who called and were very disappointed,? said Councillor Sandra Humfries, following

the previous week's decision to nip the proposal in the bud. ?They were looking forward to it, they were excited about it, and they felt it was the right step in the right direction.?

Councillor Tom Mrakas offered the flipside, offering the perspective of residents: ?I have spoken to many residents and it is an overwhelming response from residents that are not in favour of this. While some businesses might be in favour, the response from the residents is overwhelmingly negative to this project.?

If the feedback offered by each Councillor is true, then there is clearly a dichotomy that needs to be addressed around the table. In my view, however, this is a case where the interests of the local businesses might just have to trump those of the residents.

Let's face facts. Unless it comes to parking concerns in the historic downtown core, residents and lawmakers alike give the impression of wanting change until it comes time to set such change in stone.

Council members need to do a full evaluation on what their objections might be.

If the objection is simply that it will make their morning drive or their evening commute a few minutes longer, that might not be good enough. If it is a case ?Well, that's just not the way things are done in Aurora?? That should be left on the wayside.

If, however, their concerns are it will drive traffic into the surrounding communities, that is a valid one and a golden opportunity for Council to promote Industrial Parkway as the traffic bypass it was meant to be. Council members love talking about it, but continually fall short of providing concrete direction on the follow-through.

Business owners are hurting. The vast majority of residents objecting to the plan are likely the same residents who have taken their business elsewhere to the bustling Bayview Avenue corridor and the 404 hub.

This drain is part of the problem and if they are not part of the solution, adjustments will have to be made to accommodate the people businesses would like to draw in from elsewhere to spend some money.