

BROCK'S BANTER: What a rush!

By Brock Weir

Tradition has it that the wheels of justice turn slow.

It is an old adage, but one that people hoping for a certain outcome often hold true.

Often used derisively, it does have a certain truth to it.

Over the years, this phrase has been applied in many different areas and was even trotted out a few times during the last couple of municipal election campaigns when people came to the podium to speak out on a certain issue collecting dust or not having been satisfactorily addressed in the eyes of the one doing the whining.

All too often though it is a truism that can be used by local lawmakers to their own advantage, as was the case in two very different ways at last week's Council meeting on two very different issues that have had significant airplay in Council chambers: Mavrinac Park and Library Square, the debate around which is rapidly becoming an inextricable part of our proud Aurora Heritage.

Let's tackle the latter first because, as it is getting on in years, the debate might be too frail to hang in to the end of this week's Banter.

During last week's meeting, Council members did not shy away from making lengthy, circular oratories on the future of Library Square, all within a larger debate on what to do with the previously shaky Cultural Precinct proposal. Stripping their words bare, while they may differ on the fine details of what they would like to see in the area, they were basically on the same page: enough was enough.

One of the first at bat was Councillor Michael Thompson who underscored the fact it has taken successive councils over 15 years to make a decision no less than four times.

?We said let's not rush this, but what are we going to do with those buildings?? he said of a motion from the last term of Council from then-councillor Evelyn Buck to look into knocking down the two underutilized, deteriorating buildings in Library Square in favour of a brand-spanking-new multipurpose asset everyone can enjoy. ?So, election time comes and we had a Council orientation session and in those orientation binders, one of the key priorities of this term was the disposition of those two buildings. At the heart of it all, the decision we, as a group need to make is what are we doing with those two buildings? I can't speak for everybody else, but I am ready to make that decision tonight, but I don't think other members of Council are. That is where we need to get?before this term is over and the issue rolls onto the next Council. 15 years to make a decision on what to do with those two buildings is absurd.?

As someone who has sat through endless meetings on the subject, including a handful of very well attended public sessions that garnered nearly 40 concrete suggestions on what to do and, so far, absolutely nothing to show for it, I agree ? it is absurd and it is time to turn the page.

But wait, in the other corner, we have the issue of Mavrinac Park, the development of which galvanized and engaged the up-and-coming section of Aurora like nothing before.

They came out in droves to encourage Council to fight for what they believed was right, they encouraged Council to go to the mat for them ? and for themselves to enforce their subdivision agreements ? and they ultimately did.

Now, before anyone could have anticipated ? least of all this writer, who apparently wrongly predicted a long, painful process before ground could actually be broken on the site ? there is a decent, reasonable preliminary vision with the possibility of beginning the process of turning this land into something the residents want before the year is out.

It is a lofty goal, but one most members of Council were eager to get started ? bar one: Councillor Paul Pirri, who was clear from the very beginning of the debate that he was opposed to this being used as parkland.

?I still don't understand why we are rushing this,? he said. ?I think through the work we have done it was established that this park was not needed and now I see Council trying to make Mr. Downey move as quickly as possible to get something done and I am not sure this is appropriate for us to be doing. There have been a lot of meetings and opportunities where we have spoken about the need to get good, strong public information and we have all acknowledged at one point or another that it just doesn't happen during the summer. People go on vacation, people aren't around, so I am not sure why we wouldn't take our time to do things properly.?

While the Councillor conceded the residents in the area would ?very much? like to see this park brought to fruition, that is the problem with the argument: Outside consultants found a park was not needed in the area but the residents who actually live in the area day in and day out vehemently disagree.

Hemming and hawing over consultation during the summer months is a problem in and of itself, yes, but it is not the problem here.

It is a well-worn complaint and there are ways to overcome the issue.

The real issue is engaging people in public consultation itself.

The issue of Mavrinac Park probably brought out more people to Council chamber than any other issue in recent years, with the exception of Highland Gate. They are engaged on the issue and, whatever time of the year plans might come at them, they will be happy to engage.

Council has continually expressed concern over what appears to be a lack of engagement from residents at large, whether at meetings about roads or sidewalks where the number of staff in attendance outnumber the amount of attendees three to one, lacklustre survey results, or waiting to hit that individual magic number each Councillor holds close to their chest that kicks middling input over the line to 'sufficient' ground.

If anyone wonders why that is, I don't think anyone needs to look further than Library Square and the revitalization of Downtown Aurora for the answer.

Aurorans have answered the call time and time again over the last two decades to provide input on what should be done in the area and, so far, all their suggestions have been filed away with little to no action and being, in the end, little more than a social occasion for residents to meet their Council members and catch up with their neighbours.

For the public to be engaged, lawmakers need to show that they too are engaged with the public and that means taking action. You can only dip into the well so many times before it inevitably runs dry.

If setting the end of 2016 as a possible groundbreaking on Mavrinac is a 'rush', I personally welcome this brave, new world and hope this momentum spills like a westbound tidal wave heading to Yonge Street.