

Hotel and conference centre part of Stronach's future plans in Aurora



By Brock Weir

As thousands of people filled the marquee on the northern edge of his property for two nights of revelry, Frank Stronach looked on with pride.

After all, Friday and Saturday's Hoedown has grown from a relatively small barbeque in his back yard into York Region's biggest party.

But no matter how much pride he takes in the exceptional success of the party ? and there was over \$530,000 raised this year alone to be shared between 20 community organizations ? there is, in his mind, still so much more to do.

Mr. Stronach, 85, the founder and former CEO of Magna International, marked the business's 60th anniversary last month. Joined by incumbent CEO Don Walker, Mr. Stronach met with current employees, talked shop and unveiled a portrait of himself which will take pride of place in Magna's head office in perpetuity ? no matter where that head office happens to be down the road.

The visit itself might have been just a few minutes' walk from his Aurora home, but it was a world away from the business founded all those many years ago in a small Toronto garage.

?When you're able to create jobs, that gives you a good feeling,? says Mr. Stronach. ?I think we have about 20,000 people in York Region and the spin-off effect is about three or four in the automotive industry. From there, you have gas stations, grocery stores, carpenters, and the spin-off effect is huge.?

These last 60 years have been a ?slow revolutionary process? from those humble beginnings in the city but somewhere along the line Mr. Stronach says he began feeling York Region was the perfect place for a head office.

?I am a bit of a farmer and there was more space here,? he says, ?Around that same time, I acquired the farm and naturally I didn't want to travel too far for work.?

It is this very concept of living and working within the community that was a guiding force behind his development of Magna's corporate philosophy, still in force today, which commits two per cent of Magna's profits to be reinvested within the communities in which it operates.

Locally, the annual Wild, Wild West Hoedown is probably the most visible manifestation of this philosophy, along with the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex on Wellington Street East, Newmarket's Magna Centre, and the cancer centre at Southlake Regional Health Centre which bears his family name.

?It is a basic philosophy in me,? he says. ?The reason why we do well is we have good, dedicated employees and it also means we have to recognize that in management and make sure that if our factories are here there have to be some benefits for the employees. I have anchored that in our corporate constitution.?

As he divides his time between Aurora and Austria, Mr. Stronach says he has ?a nice feeling? every time he drives out on Aurora Road to see his name on the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex knowing he made a contribution to something that is so enjoyed by the community.

Despite stepping away from Magna and focusing on his passion for horseracing and gaming through the Stronach Group, a company

which now owns Santa Anita Park, Gulfstream Park, and the Pimlico Race Course, which is home to the Preakness, Mr. Stronach remains very focused on the local community.

“I have lived most of my life on a farm, and there is an old saying that we are what we eat,” he says, “and I think we eat a lot of chemicals. I want to produce food without chemicals.”

To that end, he is using his York Region farmland as well as his expansive farms in the United States to farm organic produce, which he hopes will be available in Aurora in the future.

People travelling on Wellington Street East might have noticed a freshly plowed field on the southeast quadrant of Bayview and Wellington. Mr. Stronach has a grand vision for this corner for a hotel and convention centre, a development which will also include one of his supermarkets on site.

“Years ago, I hardly knew anybody who had an allergy 60 years ago or thereabouts,” he explains. “Now when you take a look, it is very difficult for the school boards to say what foods they should serve. I enjoy doing things which have a positive impact on society.”

Mr. Stronach is also looking at measures which have a positive impact on our environment as well, reiterating his idea to make his proposal for a 70 ? 80 acre “eco park” in southeast Aurora a reality sooner rather than later.

The “Eco Park” proposal has hit many snags along the way, but he says there is “no question” it remains a commitment of his, land which will be put into a trust.

“Its primary purpose will be that the schools in York Region can have day trips and there will be some buildings there such as a learning centre where they can point out various things which are important to the ecosystem from the wildlife, to the trees and flowers. I think we should make young people aware of how important the ecosystem is. You have to be very careful about what is important.

“We want to highlight we have built a nice community, but it is ongoing work. We can always make things better yet, and that's the message we always want to get across loud and clear.”