

POLITICS AS USUAL: Failure to Consult

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

I attended last week's Council meeting and arrived to find the usually near-empty chamber almost full. A room full of people who have trudged out on a freezing cold night to hear ? voluntarily - politicians blather on means something serious must be afoot. And indeed it was. Folks were furious about the proposed Heritage District. After months of work, the consultant was tabling his report on the proposed creation of the South East Aurora Heritage District. Unfortunately, it seemed rather obvious from the sheer numbers present and the vehemence of their opposition, that the proposed South East Aurora Heritage district is dead in the water. It will, in all likelihood, not proceed.

Not because it is or isn't a good idea. Not because the study was or wasn't thorough. It is not going to go forward because the folks affected were not consulted. It's that simple.

I am not criticizing Town Staff. Nor am I criticizing the consultant. They all did their jobs as described and they did them well. Unfortunately, it is the process itself that is flawed. I have seen this occur time and time again, where large initiatives that have community-wide implications often either die before they get off the ground or they take years ? and many millions of dollars ? to move forward.

Inevitably, the issue comes down to public consultation or lack thereof. There are always large groups of people who come forward mid-to-late in a process outraged that they have not been consulted.

How can that be? I can tell you how. Because the public consultation process is driven by legislation, not common sense. Common sense will tell you that you must ensure that everyone affected is consulted. Thus, at a minimum, every single home and business should get a hand delivered letter from the Town informing them of the initiative and asking for feedback ? multiple times if necessary.

That is not what happens.

The process, as it stands now, defines who, in what ?area?, should be consulted, right down to how many homes within how many metres, must be ?notified?. As a consequence, often only small groups of folks get directly informed or ?consulted? about a proposed undertaking. Aside from poor results, this process also leads to serious conflicts ? often pitting neighbour against neighbour.

Under the legislated process, broader public consultation seems to consist solely of advisory committee meetings, notices in the paper, and notices on the town website. All standard practice. And all standards for failure.

The legislated process is predicated on a shaky assumption about the level of engagement of the public in town affairs. It assumes everyone is engaged.

How many people actually check the town website for updates on new initiatives? You check the website to find out how to enroll your kids in swimming, not whether your neighbourhood is being fundamentally altered.

Similarly, how many people check town advisory committee meeting agendas to find out what's happening in their community? I'd be shocked if it's more than 10 people. Clearly, merely meeting legislative requirements is not enough to say one has consulted the public.

There are always proponents and opponents of any community undertaking. You will never have unanimity of views, unanimity of support. Nothing will ever get built or designed if you want everyone to agree.

However, public consultation is not about gaining unanimity of support, it is about ensuring fair and equal voice for those affected. For a public consultation process to be successful, two fundamental questions must be addressed: Who is the public? And, what constitutes support?

How can you say you have consulted with the public when you haven't defined who or what that public is? How can you say there is support for, or opposition to, an initiative when you haven't defined what support or opposition looks like? What proportion of that public must agree with the initiative before it goes forward?

These are questions that should be addressed before any community initiative is developed.

Failure to answer these questions is why these types of initiatives cause such acrimony. It is also why they fail.

It isn't further consultation that is needed, it is meaningful consultations. Before you go out to the ?public? again, I respectfully suggest that you decide who you are consulting, how and why ? otherwise the only ?public? you will hear are those with the loudest voices.

Until next week, stay informed, stay involved because this is, after all, Our Town.