

BROCK'S BANTER: A Giant Leap

Baby Steps & A Giant Leap

By Brock Weir

It is a common refrain heard year in and year out that something needs to be done to bring people into Aurora's Downtown Core. Hundreds of hours have been spent sitting around various tables, out on the road on fact finding missions, and hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent on legwork and paperwork, but little has ultimately come forward.

Things could take a tremendous step forward if Council decides to move ahead with recommendations in the draft Community Improvement Plan, a formula which could, among other incentives, provide public money to help business owners in downtown heritage buildings spruce up their storefronts and facades and provide tax breaks and other incentives to 'intensify' and redevelop their properties.

Some of these measures are good ideas, but inevitably they will be a tough sell to taxpayers but, as an equally common refrain 'and one heard particularly often over the last few weeks' it is a step forward.

Around the holiday season, however, the perennial problem of getting bodies Downtown?well, it takes a holiday.

There was a flurry of activity on Saturday as hundreds of people took part in the annual bazaar at Trinity Anglican Church, before hopping across the street to take in a full plate of activities including the annual Christmas Market hosted by the Aurora Community Band, the final day of Bene Acta Vita, the art show and sale tribute to Dorothy Clark McClure, and family crafts in the basement. Seasonal crafts and products in hand 'and maybe a piece or two of Dorothy's work' the next stop was next door at the Aurora Public Library for the annual book sale hosted by the Optimist Club of Aurora. From there, people had the option of returning for more books on Saturday or heading up the hill to the Cultural Centre again for the annual 'Special O' holiday craft and sale to benefit our local Special Olympics Athletes. In addition to these special holiday activities, people were also seen heading into Caruso & Company for some Christmas merriment and/or heading up Yonge Street a few stores to Aurora Downtown Hardware for some unusual and unique deals to be found in Mike and Lorraine Evans' retirement sale.

Wherever their ultimate destination over the weekend, the people provided a bustling scene on both days, to be sure, and I'd wager downtown revitalization was the furthest thing from their minds. On the other hand, with cars parked along both sides of a healthy stretch of Victoria Street, and unhealthy mayhem unfolding in the parking lot at the Aurora Public Library and the postage stamp-sized parking lot behind the Cultural Centre, parking might have been a more pressing concern.

Over the last few months we have heard from a couple of Councillors that their fellow Council members were either 'rushing' things by going forward with plans for old public library building after 12 years of nothingness and, barring that, making a wrong move with little public consultation.

Admittedly, public consultation has been limited, but it has not been due to lack of effort. Two public sessions to figure out what to do with Library Square were publicized far and wide. Perhaps there has been a lack of engagement, but maybe it is as good as it is going to get.

If those who wanted to take a public pulse wanted to think outside the box, standing at the corner of Victoria and Church with a clipboard on Saturday to see what they wanted to see happen at the old library, that would have been the time to do it. If they had, I still think knocking down the relics and either building something new with parking, or creating an open space would still be the two recommendations on the table. Anything that would alleviate parking.

Now that Council has decided to put some meat on its bones, it will be interesting to see whether they can pluck up the courage to make a decision, or whether it will have to be up to the 2018-2024 term of Council to get the job done.

By that time, should Council's decision last week to put two very important questions on next year's election ballot bear fruit? Library Square could be blessed with a passionate Councillor in that particular ward advocating on behalf of his or her residents to alleviate parking pandemonium.

Although I remain firm in my conviction that adopting a ward system would be an unwelcome move in Aurora, some issues this year have made me question how different our current civic landscape would be if Aurorans faced the question on the 2010 ballot. Would a Councillor dedicated to championing the future of the chunk of Aurora southeast of Yonge and Wellington been able to influence Council on finalizing Library Square's future back in 2011? Would a ward Councillor in Aurora's southeast corner been able to scream bloody murder far earlier in the term if they suspected something amiss on a grading application on Longthorpe Court, thus avoiding our three month nightmare over three relatively insignificant trees?

Would a ward Councillor, channeling the energies of his or her respective constituents, pull any more weight in what is sure to be an

interesting upcoming battle between the Town of Aurora and Minto Communities over a potential piece of six acre parkland in the Mavrinac neighbourhood?

Probably not. And given the unlikely event over 50 per cent of eligible Aurorans heading to the municipal polls next year, these are likely hypotheticals which will never be answered.