

BROCK'S BANTER: A Very Long Engagement

By Brock Weir

In this line of work, sometimes you find delight in the strangest of places.

While (unsuccessfully) trying to find a file photo in our archives, I stumbled upon the issue for the week of October 31, 2006.

Aesthetically, much has changed but however much things have changed, there the more they stay the same.

This was the penultimate issue before the 2006 Municipal Election and gracing the front page were the majority of candidates on the proverbial trail. Some were future mayors, some incumbent and future Councillors, and others who have moved as well to different things but remain relative household names to this day.

Absent from the picture was Council candidate Norm Weller, but he was not absent entirely from this particular issue. On Page 7 a half-page ad from Mr. Weller makes his pitch for Aurorans to return him to the Council table. Amid a collage of local landmarks, he asks: "What's wrong with these photos?"

Judging by the ad, a big issue was downtown parking. "Do we demolish the old library and old fire hall?" he asks. "What about a new library building?" he continues. Without asking questions, the simple statements follow: "Victoria Street's big parking problem?", "Hot Spot Youth Centre?", "Teen drop-in centre?", followed by more questions: "What should happen to the old hydro building?" and "How do we finance?"

Mr. Weller promises answers to these questions and many more in the following issue of The Auroran, but when we get down to it, some of these questions are still awaiting answers eight years later. Unfortunately, the Hot Spot Youth Centre is an issue which has sorted itself. The teen drop-in centre has morphed into the renovations at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex and the issue of "How do we finance?" has been a hot one in Aurora in the last few months when it comes to the Complex and the upcoming Joint Operations Centre. No matter what side of the debate you stand on, there has been undeniable progress on these fronts.

Not so for the others.

While the "new" public library has been an undeniable success and become a well-loved facility, two Councils later we're still waiting for a decision on whether to demolish the old library or fire hall. Victoria Street's "big parking problem" has only become bigger with increased activity in the neighbourhood brought on by the Aurora Cultural Centre, seasonal initiatives like the Farmers' Markets and increasingly engaged and active church parishes. Meanwhile, on the "other side of the tracks", the old Hydro Building has once again become a hot button issue around the Council table.

DEPLOYING THE BRAKES

The questions swirling around Victoria Square in search of an answer remain in limbo, but it is not due to a lack of interest, at least on Council's part. Public meetings have been held on the subject. Engagement at these public have been passionate, but as far as attendance is concerned, they haven't exactly been barnburners. Constructive ideas have been put forward, reports were tendered to Council with options, heels then dragged.

Although some (one or two) started dragging their feet in a belief they were somehow rushing to a decision after a decade, a more reasonable reason to start pushing on the brake pedal was to see the results of the Cultural Master Plan. After all, if you're building a "cultural map", it is good to have everything possible on the table for a first look before you start taking things away.

Perhaps with a more fulsome picture out there, and issues likely to be of concern to a wider array of Aurorans beyond those who have to fight the Battle of Victoria Street daily behind the wheel, there will be a greater degree of public interest on this area's future. I'm not particularly hopeful, but, what the heck, it's a New Year and I am brimming with optimism.

PEDAL TO THE MEDAL

This optimism has started to wear a little bit thin, however, when it comes to issues surrounding the proposed Hillary-McIntyre Park, which will bring two beautiful heritage homes together, plus a third wheel, into a four acre historical mecca for Aurora.

It is an interesting plan, and one which I have followed with great interest since it was first floated, but it now seems, in my opinion, to be a plan in search of a way to justify itself. In the report before Council this week, recommendations seem to be moving away from what was originally envisioned as a redeveloped central property with dynamic museum space, offices, and a banquet facility bookended by museums in the forms of Hillary House and Horton Place.

Now, commercial partnerships seem to be the order of the day with recommendations to make this a "wellness" destination for any

variety of purposes including professional uses and, using examples from places as diverse as Kingston ? both Ontario's and Jamaica's ? suggesting use as a retirement facility.

As such, funding models seem to have shifted away from a mixture of Federal and Provincial grants topped up with a dollop of a few million from Aurora's Hydro Reserve Account, towards more and varied grant programs. If those can cover the bulk of the project, that is wonderful, but ultimately the town will be on the hook.

?The fiscal risk to the Town is limited in operational terms, while the initial capital costs are not insignificant,? the report notes. ?A capital acquisition of this scale, in our view, should necessitate active planning for the renewed of the properties rather than an acceptance that these properties are municipal buildings and subject only to long-term planning for their reuse as opportunities arise. Rather, an active plan for development will be required both to ensure the integrity of the site and to achieve development within a reasonable timeframe (still likely to be 5 years+).?

Despite this rather wide window, Councillors are facing a recommendation this week to authorise staff to begin the negotiation of ?the terms of agreements of purchase and sale? of the three properties for Council approval.?

It is a necessary first step, to be sure, but with the years of toing and froing on Victoria Street, it seems like an unnecessarily accelerated process. Aside from debates within these pages, on the blogosphere and in other venues, there has been no formal public consultation to find out whether this is something the taxpayers would like to see the Town take on. Nor do we have any idea on just what this will ultimately cost the Town out of pocket should these grants not be successful.

Councillors are due to discuss the costs behind closed doors this week, as is standard procedure for real estate matters, but they are numbers that should be up for public consumption. Reports on comparable real-estate to Horton Place peg the market value at anywhere between \$998,800 and \$2,249,000. Readman Place, meanwhile, has a much broader array of comparable values due mainly to the wide net, geographically speaking, consultants cast to find their comparators.

Despite the rather alarmist comments in the report justifying the project, including the ?isolation? of Hillary House, and the other two buildings potentially meeting the wrecking ball like many other homes in the area before people started to get their wits about them and care about the architectural significance of these buildings there doesn't seem to be, in my opinion, any particular rush. Horton Place owner John McIntyre appears to have the best interests of his miraculously preserved family home at heart, with Hillary House's designation and support it is here to stay, and despite reports that there is a degree of urgency over Readman House, being boarded up and languishing in limbo for the better part of a decade gives the impression there is plenty of time for the public to weigh in, put all the costs and potential uses on the table, and determine whether this is something Aurorans truly want to take on.