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BROCK'S BANTER: Clarity Acts

By Brock Weir

When I was in elementary school, our electives programs varied little from year to year, especially around this time of the year when the weather finally considered cooperating with the feelings of the general population.

There were often two options: take your chances that Mother Nature would be in a disagreeable mood and select the day trip to Mount St. Louis Moonstone, or?take in a walking tour of Toronto.

Despite my love of winter I wasn't ? and, let's be honest, I am still not ? the most coordinated person in the world. Skiing wasn't particularly enticing.

The result?

After a few years I essentially knew Toronto like the back of my hand and, invariably, one of the highlights was always visiting the then-Skydome.

Of course, it was always a bit of a thrill to go out there to tread on the artificial turf, and nobody could resist stooping down to ruffle the blades with your hands just a little bit.

Truth be told, however, I always got a particular kick out of the behind the scenes exhibit on the construction of the building itself. I'm not an engineering buff in particular, so that wasn't the main attraction.

What was the main attraction was the small exhibit in one or two display cases showing all the cool stuff they excavated from the site before they started pouring concrete. The site of what is now the Rogers Centre, they explained, was once a dumping ground for the first century of early settlers of what is now Toronto, and the items on display certainly underscored that point.

Broken cups and saucers, fragments of crockery, chunks of bottles eroded smooth, long-empty medicine containers, pieces of medical equipment, and even bits of textiles all survived long enough to have this second hurrah. It made me wonder what each item went through before they were tossed on the heap, how each piece was broken before being consigned, what the contents of the medicine containers and the medical equipment hoped to cure, and who wore the textiles before they became either too tattered or unfashionable.

It was a window into the era, and how consumer culture has changed overtime, but can too wide a window be too much of a good thing?

Early last month, I, like over 60 residents, walked into Town Hall to get a better understanding of Aurora's proposed Clear Bag Program, the initiative which will see all Aurora residents ditching the traditional black bags in favour of the transparent alternative in a bid to ensure waste gets into the proper channels.

Having heard no end of complaints and concerns about the program coming through this office, I was pleasantly surprised by what I found at the meeting. No, it wasn't the artfully arranged display of packages of clear GLAD bags one assumes was right in the centre of the room to diffuse any people potentially seeing the bags as some sort of boogieman. Nor was it the fact these clear bags were packaged in a bag that was anything but clear. But, it was the general tone of the room.

People had their concerns over the program, of course, and these concerns seemed to centre primarily on the issues of privacy and enforcement, but most people I spoke to seemed willing to give the program a whirl at the very least.

So, where were these residents so vociferously opposed to the program? If they were there, they were singing a different tune. If they were not, perhaps they are so opposed to the program no amount of public information or public education will convince them otherwise. Wherever they were, a report before Council this week indicates they are still out there, with approximately 75 per cent of residents voting against implementing the plan in online surveys.

At that public information centre, I took the opportunity to question Mayor Dawe and those members of Council in attendance of their views on implementation. Of the seven of nine Council members on hand, the majority appeared to be in favour of moving forward while three were more reserved about the future.

At the time, Councillor Jeff Thom asked me for my opinion. The tables were turned. Aside from one particular concern, I kept most of my thoughts to myself, but now I'll take the opportunity to answer.

Personally, I am not opposed to the clear bag program in itself. I believe it is a proposal that is coming from the right place as far as the environment is concerned, it has noble intentions and could be effective in the end. That being said, it will remain a tough sell for residents well beyond the voluntary launch targeted for June, and certainly as full roll-out approaches in October.

If three-quarters of Aurora residents remain vehemently opposed to giving garbage collectors a window into their trash to make sure everything they are throwing away is on the straight and narrow, I have to spare a thought for those people at Town Hall tasked with

making this program a reality. Godspeed.

Clear bags are not a new concept. It was first floated at last Council, sent back to staff for further information after initial opposition from the community. Duly tweaked by the Department of Environmental Services, it is back ? and so is the opposition. Yet, things seem to be moving at full speed ahead despite this opposition.

From the report before Council this week, it appears that the best medicine on tap for everyone else to get with the program, as it were, are further public information sessions. It seems to me that most people seemed to have made up their minds. Efforts to re-educate the public are rarely successful, particularly if the public is either unwilling to learn or has made an educated decision on their own.

Re-education, in many cases, often breeds resentment, such as the case of a certain venerable Canadian department store that took inspiration from an eggplant to re-educate the public that what they really wanted were high-end designer duds, rather than quality, affordable merchandise and Viking washing machines. Remains of that particular retailer can now probably be found under the Rogers Centre.

Nevertheless, it seems the clear bags will soon be here to stay. Allowing the use of an unlimited amount of opaque grocery bags within the clear bag, while it may allay some of the concerns of residents' does, in my opinion, have the effect of rendering the program useless if the intent truly is to deflect waste into proper channels.

Public information sessions are always welcome, but let's not expect a miracle that a particular piece of information will unlock that door leading to a firm embrace by the public.