

BROCK'S BANTER: Don't Ask, Don't Tell

By Brock Weir

Aurora's Service Level Review was very interesting reading last week. As you can see in this issue, the extensive document takes stock of all the services provided to residents by the Town, whether deemed essential to the organization, or an extra perk of being an Auroran.

Councillors told consultants they viewed residents as pretty content with what was provided with their tax dollar, but it skirts the issue of whether this same feeling of contentment also extends to the amount of tax dollars they have to shell out for said services. After listening to the arguments during last year's budget process to get the ball rolling on this long overdue study, I can't say with complete confidence that it truly achieved the objectives Councillors had in mind. It was often cited by Mayor Dawe and Councillor Gallo as essential to determining whether projects and services are needs versus wants when they tackle the millions of dollars worth of projects for the year ahead. This is not exactly what they got.

In order to determine whether taxpayers are not just getting the best bang for their buck, but rather the best bang they want to get for their buck, it is essential to go out directly to the people to find out. If feedback from residents ? or, more likely, a lack of feedback from residents ? translates to a feeling of contentment for Councillors, I think that is a mistake.

As last year's budget process indicated ? as it does every year ? residents, whether they are content or seething under the service, are not necessarily inclined to beat down the doors of Town Hall to tell them so. There might be a very different story if pollsters went to them to gauge just how much residents are willing to pay in taxes for which services. I pity the pollsters if it turns out to be a bit of a watershed of people venting their spleens if Councillor Buck is accurate in her assessment that residents are indeed ?outraged.? I don't personally have the sense they are ?outraged?, but they certainly have no lack of questions.

Taking the services review to the next step and taking it back to the people will be, in my view, a valuable exercise. Not only will it paint a far more accurate picture, but it will also serve to provide a concrete guideline for Councils to work with.

After all, one or two Councillors continue to flog the proverbial dead horse that residents are just biding their time until the moment is right to light their torches and march menacingly up John West Way demanding changes to various nefarious undertakings going on in the Church Street School under the guise of the Aurora Cultural Centre. And still biding their time after four years.

A thorough review and public survey could be a welcome first step in weeding out and finally putting these poor, flogged, dead horses to rest. And, of course, giving birth to some new, doomed foals for the next Council term ahead.

MORE ON DEAD HORSES

Consider for a moment the announcement made by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in the wee hours of Monday morning that he will now sit out next month's Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Sri Lanka.

Although Canada will still be represented, the Prime Minister attributes his absence to the dismal human rights record of the host nation.

?When Sri Lanka was selected [as host], Canada was hopeful that the Sri Lankan government would seize the opportunity to improve human rights conditions and take steps towards reconciliation and accountability,? he said in a statement. ?Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

?Canada noted with concern the impeachment of the Sri Lankan Chief Justice earlier this year, and we remain disturbed by the ongoing reports of intimidation and incarceration of political leaders and journalists, harassment of minorities, reported disappearances, and allegations of extra-judicial killings.? He concluded his statement by underscoring his belief that the Sri Lankan government has ?failed to uphold the Commonwealth's core values, which are cherished by Canadians?; that the Commonwealth, ?to remain relevant? must stand in defence of the basic principles of freedom, democracy, and respect for human dignity,? which is the foundation stone of the Commonwealth.

The Prime Minister is, of course, going to be on the right side of history with this, and is not the first to speak out about it.

For the first time in decades, The Queen, as Head of the Commonwealth, will be sitting out. The Palace cited the logistics of long haul travel for someone of her age, but cynics thought otherwise.

After all, one of her first public acts after a brief illness earlier this year, was signing the Commonwealth Charter, a document providing, among other things, a blueprint for human rights issues within this international family.

?We are committed to equality and respect for the protection and promotion of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development, for all without discrimination on any grounds as the foundations of peaceful, just and stable

societies. We are implacably opposed to all forms of discrimination, whether rooted in gender, race, colour, creed, political belief, and other grounds.?

Wise words to live by for sure, and words often taken for granted by countries such as Canada, but in a Commonwealth where such a large swath of its membership in the developing world holds political and sexual rights to be offences punishable by prison ? or worse ? it is a laudable pipe dream, but a pipe dream nonetheless.

Will this official stance, however, extend to this winter's Olympiad in Sochi, Russia, a country which continues to exhibit a dismal track record towards its own LGBT community? Somehow I doubt it.