

BROCK'S BANTER: Exodus

By Brock Weir

Thursday's news that Magna International was planning on packing up and moving out of Aurora to apparently greener pastures ? or, at least pastures they might actually own ? in King Township has been met with some curious reactions.

While Mayor Dawe said their move was ?disappointing? was the understatement of the year ? a statement few would disagree with ? others have greeted the news with a mixture of dismay and worry over the impact such a move would have on the local economy and individual jobs, along with a degree of relief.

Nobody wants to see an employer as large as Magna leave a community as small as Aurora, but the relief stems from growing stomach knots over not knowing what the future held. Over the last two years, speculation continued to mount over Magna's intentions as far as Aurora was concerned, with some allaying fears that nothing was on the horizon while others proffered theories ranging from the plausible to completely outlandish.

Now, we know and Aurora has until the end of 2017 to plan ahead.

That is not to say ?we? don't have to worry about this for just over two years, but this time needs to be spent picturing an Aurora without Magna. Since its arrival in Aurora, the company and the municipality have become inextricably linked not just as a local employer but also as a community partner.

One only has to look as far as a few metres east of Magna's main campus on Wellington Street to see a permanent reminder of this relationship at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex, which bears the name of company founder Frank Stronach and his family, who have contributed significantly to this community. Elsewhere, the Magna Room at the Aurora Public Library regularly serves as a valuable community resource, while Magna's annual Wild, Wild West Hoedown continues, 26 years since its founding (albeit in Mr. Stronach's backyard then in Newmarket) to be a prime attraction, and huge community fundraiser, and continues to go from strength to strength.

There is no doubt that Magna's contributions to the community will continue. Part of their corporate philosophy is, of course, to give back to the communities in which their employees live and work, but in two short years the landscape is about to change.

After The Auroran broke the story on Thursday morning, I had the opportunity to attend a meeting of Aurora's Economic Development Advisory Committee that evening. Its members, comprised of Councillors and local business leaders, had much to discuss in the way of maximizing business opportunities and bringing in new economic drivers over the next four years, the term of their current mandate.

For one member, however, there was a continued theme of reaching out to businesses for sponsorship, contributions and input on a variety of fronts to further many of these endeavours. The magic bullet in almost every instance, of course was either Magna International or Frank Stronach.

While the Stronach Family might remain in Aurora with their other investments well after the company its patriarch founded has taken their Midas touch to King, Aurora is going to have to grapple with the fact at least one component of this magic bullet simply might not be there beyond 2017.

Perhaps a philosophy of trying to strike while the iron's hot will be the theme of the next two years, but that might not be the most productive tactic.

APRIL SHOWERS BRING MAY?

As I considered that future myself on Sunday, it struck me what a difference 10 years makes. A decade ago to the day, I had just finished my second year at Ottawa's Carleton University. At the time, I was still a bit unclear on where I wanted my future to be, and where it actually lay. As it happened, I was in the middle of a half-hearted job search which ultimately bore little fruit.

Disheartened by my lack of progress on that front, I decided the night before to sleep in a little bit and nurse my proverbial wounds. It had been a relatively interesting week in Canadian Politics. Members of Parliament were facing various health crises, the Federal Government teetered on the brink of collapse with a confidence vote rapidly looming on the horizon and, mercifully for Ottawa, attention was due to be temporarily shifted to a damp Regina as Saskatchewan ? and Prime Minister Paul Martin ? prepared to welcome the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh to celebrate the centennial of the Province, and Alberta, joining Confederation. Ongoing construction in the Bayview and Wellington area quickly thwarted any plans I had of a leisurely morning catching up on some much needed sleep and, in a huff, I got out of bed and got on with business. It was a good thing I did.

Turning on CBC News, there was a bit of a buzz in their Ottawa studios, they claimed, as they awaited a press conference called by

Mr. Martin. At the time, they were unsure what the thrust of the media event would be, but with the government hanging in the balance, just about anything could have been in the cards. Few people, however, anticipated the hand that was about to be dealt. I recall the gasps on the screen when the Prime Minister walked into the press conference with Newmarket-Aurora's Conservative MP Belinda Stronach in tow. As we all remember, the bombshell was the rookie MP was set to cross the floor not only to sit as a Liberal MP, but also Minister Responsible for Human Resources and Skills Development and Minister Responsible for Democratic Renewal.

As a cursory crunching of numbers made clear, the beleaguered Prime Minister found his Joan of Arc.

While the government survived, and Ms. Stronach's political influence and profile went from strength to strength, local reaction was fast and, occasionally furious, but in the following Federal election, although the Liberals lost power, Ms. Stronach was returned to Ottawa by an even greater margin under the red banner than she had under the blue.

Looking back, it hardly seems like that momentous day was a full 10 years ago, but it is. Although she might no longer be a bright light on the political scene, the legacy of that time in office continues in many areas, including Neighbourhood Network, the upcoming Belinda's Place women's shelter in Newmarket, and the Aurora-based Magna for the Community.

Even though the company is departing, long may its legacy, and those of the people who built it, endure.