

BROCK'S BANTER: Here comes the boom

By Brock Weir

In the months leading up to this October's municipal election, Councillors are devoting a considerable amount of time, effort and money into the half of Aurora lying west of the tracks.

That is not to say that there is not enough love to go around. Hours have been spent ensuring the lands slated for business and residential development between Bayview Avenue and Highway 404 are used to their best advantage. Groundwork is continually being laid to accommodate thousands of new Aurorans who will, over the next half-decade or so, make the choice to settle in this area.

Heck, Aurora is even bound for the courts to see if it can flex its muscle on a six acre plot of land on Mavrinac Boulevard neighbouring residents would like to retain as a park.

Nevertheless, residents west of the tracks are basking in the glow shared only with an overindulged younger child.

The newly approved Community Improvement Plan will provide \$220,000 at first blush to help downtown business owners spruce up their premises from the outside in, and provide very useful incentives and breaks to turn healthy stocks of heritage and give old buildings a new lease on life as commercial and business premises.

This will work hand in hand with the Aurora Promenade Plan, which will provide cohesive guidelines to make the Yonge Street and Wellington Street corridors more attractive places to shop and stroll.

But that's old news now. Last week, political action in what is routinely described as Aurora's Downtown Core, focused on the southeast quadrant of Yonge and Wellington.

Residents and business owners in the area arrived en masse to speak out against proposed plans to turn their section of Town ? along with a narrow slice of the north side of Wellington Street East, into a Heritage Conservation District. Delegates appearing before Council were decisive and unanimous in their arguments against the plan, but they did not reflect a full picture of feelings in the area.

Others sitting relatively silently in the crowd were equally enthusiastic about the plan but, for reasons known only to them, decided to sit on their hands and confine their positive views of the plans to a small meeting held just prior to the main event in a committee room at Town Hall.

Perhaps they were saving their views for when the cameras roll at next week's Council meeting, but if they are still in favour of the plan, they've lost the momentum.

MEET THE NEIGHBOURS

Had the passionate residents stuck around after their items were discussed, they may have found later discussions enlightening, getting to know some new neighbours firsthand. This will come in the form of a new apartment building with ground-level retail that will be moving into the vacant lot just north of the old Aurora Post Office/Clock Tower building.

In the interests of full disclosure, I will say at this point that The Auroran operates out of the Clock Tower building and, as such, we will be direct neighbours of this new building. After some concerns I had over the plan had been addressed by Council (particularly how much room we would have to actually open up our windows!) I'm ready to welcome them into the neighbourhood.

Any reason to bring people into this particular business area is something to celebrate and foster. With Centro forging ahead with their condos near Yonge and Centre Street, as developers put the finishing touches on incorporating the historic home of the former spa next door to the former post office building into a new apartment complex, and as plans continue to clarify on a new proposal to raze the now former LW Plaza into a condo/retail development, it is clear that Aurora is on the cusp of a downtown boom.

BUT IS IT READY?

God knows there are enough plans, studies and consultants working to make the answer to that question a resounding yes, but there is still an elephant in the room which needs to be addressed.

The elephant's skin was grazed slightly at last week's general committee by a couple of Councillors wanting to make sure that, before they signed off on this redevelopment at Yonge and Wellington, it wasn't creating a new problem by solving another ? namely parking.

As someone who works almost every day directly next door to where this new building is going in, and in an office building which shares a parking lot with the proposed building in question, parking is a significant problem. Finding adequate parking in our own lot can be a challenge on the best of days, the best of days being those which are not hampered by piles of snow taking up a third of all potential parking spots. Without a serious effort to address parking on this stretch of Victoria Street, let alone the downtown core as a whole, I am looking forward to seeing just where everyone will find a parking space, simply out of sheer, perhaps masochistic, curiosity.

COUNCIL CAN'T HAVE ITS CAKE AND EAT IT TOO

If the wish is to keep a significant section of Aurora alive and intact, while bringing new people into the area to live, shop and create an overall resurgence in an area in decline, you need more than a heritage district and giving the thumbs-up for people to build up without giving due consideration to where these people are going to spread out. Hoping they move into the area and becoming so taken with Viva whizzing past their front doors that they give up their car altogether is a cute idea, but let's face it, that ain't gonna happen. Ignoring the problem is not going to solve it. Hoping developers gallop in on the proverbial white horse with a solution to the problem isn't going to do it either. It is going to take some decisive action. While residents turned out last week to rail against the proposed heritage district, keen-eyed Councillors will have noticed that many of these residents sitting in the audience were the same residents arguing for Library Square to be cleared and used to alleviate the parking problem. And yet, as seems to be the current trajectory for the Heritage Conservation District, plans to put parking ? or a new structure which includes parking ? in Library Square appears to be languishing despite a very clear mandate on what to do with the site coming down from a series of public meetings. One Councillor a few short months ago encouraged his colleagues to mothball the plan because after over a decade of debate, making a decision now would be too rushed. This same Councillor, a champion of the Aurora Promenade Plan and the revitalization that will come with it, recoiled at the idea of delaying the Plan pending further questions, saying it was time to ?fish or cut bait.? After 11 years of debate, considerable growth over those years, with much more to come, and mounting cars and traffic littering area streets, it is now time to get down to business ? or, as the saying goes, get off the pot.