

BROCK'S BANTER: Identity Crisis

By Brock Weir

The idea of ?precedent? can be tricky.

On the one hand, it provides a sturdy blueprint to lean back on when approaching an uncharted or unfamiliar situation. On the other hand, it can be a crutch for people who shy away from tackling issues in bold, new ways simply for the fact that that's just not how it has been done in the past.

It never hurts to be a trailblazer. Well, it only hurts momentarily when you take that first step out of your comfort zone, but, more often than not, getting out of that rut yields results that are fresh, exciting, and potentially bear fruit for years to come.

Close to 15 years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a high-ish profile political event as an observer after the group in question took an unexpected drubbing at the ballot box.

The purpose of the meeting was apparently to answer that age-old question, ?Where did we go wrong??

Indeed, it was the question posed at the very start of the meeting and those in attendance, a crowd fairly evenly split along age lines, had no shortage of answers. Solutions, however, were met with resistance.

One idea included reaching out to demographics that were, for some reason, seen as largely beyond the party's natural wheelhouse. Another suggested brainstorming some ?outside-the-box? events and fundraisers to not only replenish their threadbare coffers but attract new supporters ? and ultimately voters ? who might have previously viewed the party as a stodgy relic whose Best Before date was sometime when Robert Stanfield was in the bloom of youth.

Without fail, each and every one of these suggestions were tut-tutted by the majority of the crowd simply because it ?just wasn't done.?

One woman even went so far as to say, ?I've been involved in this for over 30 years, so I know what does and doesn't work.? The irony of not knowing what did and didn't work got them into that mess in the first place was lost on her.

It was a prime example of a community that was experiencing an identity crisis. It was an uncomfortable thing to observe, and I left the meeting with no further insight as to how they planned to pull themselves out of the doldrums. They eventually righted the ship ? through some of the very suggestions shot down at that roundtable.

I feel that Aurora is, in some areas, experiencing something similar.

We're in the height of election season, and once again some candidates ? both new and seasoned ? are trotting out the same chestnuts, including the well-worn: ?We need to maintain Aurora's small-town feel.?

It's a nice sentiment, to be sure, but I don't think this sentiment necessarily reflects reality.

No matter how you slice it, and regardless of whether you were pro or con at the time, the fact remains that thanks to rapid growth on the east side of Aurora, and infill developments taking place in the southern end of the municipality, Aurora is simply not a small town anymore.

Maintaining a ?small town feel? might be an ideal, but the façade is getting harder and harder to maintain as time goes on.

Similarly, Aurora's historic downtown core, a topic that has been a hallmark of each of the three municipal elections I have covered thus far, is once again a hot topic. Specifically, how can Aurora revitalize the area to be the ?main street? it once was.

Given that this has been a hot topic for more than two decades, it might be safe to assume that no strides have been made. That is not the case, however, as the outgoing Council has made significant steps towards realizing revitalization, including the approval of new housing developments in the core, as well as spurring movement on Library Square which, in my view, is a key puzzle piece in solving the downtown conundrum.

But, what I have not seen in this election campaign so far, is just what those individuals vying for your vote want the Main Street to be. A destination, sure, but a destination for what?

Mayoral candidates last week were asked by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce whether they see the bustling Bayview Avenue corridor as Aurora's new Main Street. The answer across the board was an unequivocal no.

?It has a lot of commercial retail on it and I believe that all the zoning is complete,? said John Abel. ?As far as being the Main Street, my idea would be pedestrian walking, sort of what they have in Newmarket on their Main Street and what we're striving to have in our Yonge Street downtown core.?

Chris Ballard was clearer cut in his answer.

?There is only one Main Street in Aurora in my mind and that is the historic downtown core,? he said. ?It is our Main Street in the past and it should be our Main Street in the future. What we need to do, of course, is to stop talking about how we're going to

revitalize the downtown core.?

The solution, he said, was ?vigorous? implementation of the Promenade Plan.

Geoff Dawe also said he didn't see Bayview as a Main Street, but rather a busy commercial corridor to complement the historic main street.

?We have the big box approach on Bayview, the boutique store where people come destination shopping, a totally different look and feel,? he said of Yonge. ?We have the Library, the Cultural Centre, Town Park, and I think that is the area that we would have as our main downtown and we have been working very diligently to rebuild and revitalize that area.?

Tom Mrakas was of a similar view.

?I think there is only one downtown, which is on our main street, along Yonge Street, and that is the area we need to revitalize and that we have been working towards revitalization,? he said, noting the Library Square developments. ?It is a good first step to where we are to achieve some goals of that revitalization that everyone has been talking about and I think that is how we're going to move forward and have that vibrant downtown.?

It's hard to argue the points of Mr. Dawe and Mr. Mrakas, but there is another missing piece of the puzzle. Revitalization is what everyone wants, and getting people into the core is a key component. Getting them to stay is another story.

A clear vision is needed for what Aurora wants its ?Main Street? to be beyond bricks and mortar.

It could be a culinary strip complete with bars, brew pubs, and establishments of more avant-garde fare that might feed off the Canadian Food & Wine Institute. Building on the successes of the nearby Aurora Public Library and Aurora Cultural Centre, it could be a hub for creativity with commercial art galleries, studios, bookshops, fashion (and there are a few already) and artisans like in Unionville.

The possibilities are out there, and could, perhaps, be fostered by Council-driven incentives.

Revitalization is desperately needed, but it is time to put meat on those bones.