

BROCK'S BANTER: Identity Crisis?

By Brock Weir

It might not seem like it at this precise moment, but Aurora just might be on the cusp of an identity crisis.

Business at Town Hall, whether it is Aurora's Town Hall or any other place of municipal government Canada-wide, has never been known to move at anything close to lightning speed. In fact, to most people, the word 'glacial' would probably be their more appropriate word of choice. It is certainly more charitable.

Aurora's incumbent Council, however, appears to have different ideas.

In just a few short weeks since returning to their table, the new Council has not let any grass grow under their feet.

Rather than spending time getting these feet wet in the minutia, they have immediately began laying the building blocks for change, albeit change which might come to pass a decade or two down the road.

A decade or not, it is change nonetheless.

Change can often happen in small increments, often imperceptible to the naked eye unless one is specifically looking for it. If these changes just happen to disrupt the well-oiled routine of a morning or evening commute, on the other hand, chances are people are going to sit up and pay attention.

Paramount amongst these proposals to bring change to Aurora in these early days of Council are multiple proposals to alleviate Aurora's traffic problems, particularly in the vicinity of Yonge and Wellington.

Yonge Street traffic in our historic downtown core, for instance, could be retrofitted to one lane of traffic each way, with the remainder of the street dedicated to on-street parking. A 'bold vision', according to the Mayor and many Councillors, and one which Mayor Dawe says could be a boon to local business.

Enough changes have been proposed for the Yonge and Wellington intersection to leave Aurora's historic crossroads positively raw from the picking. Among them, a left-hand turn restriction on Yonge Street could come to pass, at least for the duration of a pilot project, for peak hour traffic.

The purpose of this pilot project being, of course, to see if it does anything to snap the bottleneck of the derided, but vital, intersection. If the pilot project turns out to be a success and history tells us from the last pilot project they undertook for the same purposes nearly two decades ago that it will be the big question will be what to do with traffic.

Ah, Councillors have proposed solutions for that as well. That solution, of course, is the potential widening of Industrial Parkway North to a four lane thoroughfare on both its northern and southern legs enabling drivers to get in and out of Aurora while avoiding the bottleneck. Going beyond the inevitable headaches this could cause where Industrial meets Wellington Street East, the question has once again cropped up on what how such changes, if they ultimately come to fruition, will affect neighbourhood streets and their respective neighbourhoods leading off Yonge Street. Increased traffic in these sleepy, historic neighbourhoods is bound to get residents' dander up. It will then be a question of how the Town can best control traffic in these neighbourhoods and we are all too familiar with what happened the last time Aurora tried to control traffic in these sectors.

Even though this might sound cyclical, I can assure you that change is coming.

As each traffic proposal hit the Council table, debate inevitably swirled back to the common theme that each piece must be considered in conjunction with all the other wheels Aurora has in motion pertaining to the downtown core. But, it might be time to have a broader view and look at how these wheels are turning Town-wide in order to chart the way for the future. Further, as each of these challenges were proposed they were attributed to solving challenges related to the all-important 'growth'.

This was a challenge driven home at this week's Budget meeting by Aurora CAO Neil Garbe.

'Aurora is changing,' he said. 'It is transitioning from a suburban community to an urban community. We see the end of our green field development cycle and we see the pressures of intensification, and we have to think differently.'

Underscoring this transition, Mr. Garbe highlighted a recent visit a development in Aurora's 2C Lands, which had people camped out overnight to secure homes in the area, many of which sailed past the \$1 million mark.

'Aurora is a desirable place to be,' he concluded, adding sustainability as an overriding theme in this year's budget. 'People want to be here, and we build good communities. I think that was a very positive thing.'

It is certainly a positive thing, but it brings forward the question of how much differently can Aurora think, and how willing residents are to go along for the ride. Aurora is definitely in transition, but it is time for a consensus of what this transition will ultimately mean, beyond Official, Master and Promenade Plans. The ultimate goal towards intensification is clear, but the concept of 'thinking differently' is going to have to translate well beyond John West Way to get a firm buy-in from the community.

With growth being what it is, it is time for Aurora to face the reality that we're no longer a small town. Many of us take comfort in the fact we are small from a geographical perspective, but some have come to terms with this reality, content to settle for the oh-so-quaint (and oh-so-overplayed) term, "small town feel" instead. Trying to maintain this could be counterproductive in the end. While it is important to look at all matters relating to traffic, particularly in the downtown core, in concert with one another, they and issues well beyond traffic should be looked at in conjunction with all issues facing our Town. It is fine to accept Aurora is changing, but it is important to help steer that change, politician and member of the public alike. Things have to work together to ensure Aurora is not only sustainable to allow for people coming into the community, but sustainable, affordable, and livable for people who have called Aurora home for a great deal of their lives.