

BROCK'S BANTER: Innovation On Ice

By Brock Weir

Spring is officially here.

If you're like me, this past Sunday you found yourself suddenly surrounded by cheery optimists throwing virtual bouquets your way to celebrate the equinox as though they were expecting instant sunshine and bowers of flowers.

It is a nice sentiment but, for a winter lover like me, it was like rubbing salt in the wound.

Now that this winter is in the record books, I can look back on it with some certainty as my own ?winter of discontent?: so few cold weather days to enjoy a few of my winter favourite things. And snowflakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes are relative child's play.

With that in mind, I would like to extend the season in this space just a little bit and scrape the freezer burn off something which has been on ice far too long.

Last month, hordes of local families made Town Park a destination for Aurora's annual Arctic Adventure celebration. Kids took to Wells Street for favourite games, gathered in front of the band shell for live performances, headed over to the baseball diamond for new activities associated with the Healthy Kids Community Challenge and, most popularly, gathered at the halfway point between the band shell and the Armoury to huddle around the bonfire to keep warm.

Those huddled in any of these hotspots, however, had more elbow room than usual as there was no outdoor rink for residents eager to get their Patrick Chan on.

Despite a sudden cold snap a couple of days before the big event, the unseasonably warm February decimated the bounty of snow previously on the ground and there was not snow enough by Family Day weekend to lay a decent foundation for an outdoor skating rink, leaving many people, for whom this has become a tradition, relatively disappointed.

As I took in the scene, including the unblemished crest of the new-fallen snow where the rink is usually built, I couldn't help but think it didn't have to be this way.

My mind went back to the days of the late fall and early winter of 2013, just weeks before we were walloped in the pre-Christmas ice storm. At that time, the Council of the Day considered an interesting, innovative idea floated to them by the Parks and Recreation Department: an intriguing ?made in Aurora? solution that would have considerably extended the shelf life of our outdoor rinks and made them contingent solely on temperature rather than having enough snow to build a thick base to flood.

Created by Parks Manager Jim Tree in a response to increasingly mild winters wreaking havoc on the care and maintenance of outdoor rinks, the solution was a ?relatively simple? ice-making system consisting of an intricate network of grids featuring individual water-filled cells lying on top of the ground. These cells would be connected to create a uniform ice surface in a system. In its simplest terms: a series of larger-than-life ice cube trays.

An in-house invention, it came with a relatively conservative price tag, as far as municipal projects go, of \$54,000 to get a working prototype.

?We had approached some manufacturers and some designers to determine what we might come up with and we developed this prototype,? Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, told the Council of 2010 ? 2014. ?It seems to work, we think it is going to work; however, molds needed to be made in order to produce this prototype. We are recommending that we spend money to develop the aluminum mold to manufacture enough of these to try out on a pilot project for one of the rinks. If it works, then we would come back to Council to request additional funds in order to produce a steel mold which we would then be able to mass produce this product and use them in all of our rinks.?

Several Council members at the time were intrigued by the concept, but became skittish when it came to making a firm decision, as politicians so often do.

?We spend many man hours in the winter spraying and creating ice surfaces and nothing is more popular in the wintertime,? said then-councillor Evelyn Buck. ?People come from Newmarket to skate on our parks because they enjoy it so much [but] it has always been a problem, the amount of time and man-hours we put into creating ice surfaces to have in January and February. It is something you're constantly arguing with yourself on whether you should be doing it and yet you know how much people enjoy it.?

If the pilot worked, she added, it would be an investment well worth the money, but she shared the concerns of other members around the table when it came to patents and intellectual property rights around Mr. Tree's innovation.

Although Mr. Downey told Council he had already discussed whether Mr. Tree wanted to pursue a patent ? he didn't, said Mr. Downey, adding he could provide something in writing if Council was hesitant ? it wasn't enough for Council to pull the trigger.

?I would really hate to see a mess between the Town and a very valued employee,? said then-councillor Chris Ballard. ?I want to make sure the Town understands what it is getting and the employee understands what they are getting so there [is] no miscommunication or hurt feelings in the years to come as this thing becomes successful and takes off across North America.? But, right now, what the Town is getting, what the employee is getting, and what the residents are getting is a big, fat nothing. As far as anyone can tell, this project, something which lawmakers saw as having the potential to become wildly popular, is cooling its heels in the annals of Councils-past, consigned there by politicians who got cold feet in the end.

During the discussion, former councillor John Gallo questioned whether it is the role of a municipality to be ?innovating. In my view, it is the role of the private sector to be innovating and coming up with these kinds of things.?

Councils, however, can't always wait for the private sector to come a-knocking, especially when local governments are all too keen to reinvent wheels in favour of Made-in-Aurora or Made-in-York Region solutions to issues that have already been solved.

Someone has to do it, and if municipalities ? and those they employ ? have the wherewithal to be innovators, why not take the plunge?

It seems to be working for Newmarket, a Town which has had no hesitation in coming forward with bold innovations that have put our neighbours firmly on the map.

Perhaps it's time for Aurora to be bold again as well.

Defrosting this idea for a second look wouldn't be a bad first step.

By the time winter rolls around again this December maybe, just maybe, local youngsters ? and the young at heart ? will be able to enjoy winter-long outdoor skating.