

BROCK'S BANTER: Lost in the Mail

By Brock Weir

Ask anyone and I think they'll agree: when it comes to working with the public, communication is king.

This was evident multiple times at last week's Council meeting on several fronts, not the least of which was Council's consideration of and, to a degree, dissatisfaction with a report before them on how well they are communicating with said public.

But there was also a degree of dissatisfaction expressed pretty unanimously around the table on how well others are communicating with them.

Take, for instance, the brief hullabaloo over the proposed new radio station which is hoped to take to the Aurora airwaves by January 2016 at the latest. Going into last week's meeting, Councillors faced a recommendation to grant the fledgling group a whopping quarter of a million dollars to get the station up and running at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex (AFLC).

According to the report, the \$250,000, funded from the municipality's Growth and New Infrastructure Reserve Fund, was to go towards the design and construction of space necessary to accommodate a Community Radio Station and Sound Studio in an as-yet-unused corner of the AFLC. This figure, noted the report, stemmed from a quote for improvements to the room which came in at \$222,000, but staff added this figure seemed too high.

And how! By the time last week's meeting rolled around, this figure was knocked down significantly to just \$10,000 (coming out of the same pot), with the discrepancy chalked up to an error in communication between the radio station's proponents, municipal staff and the Mayor's office.

The idea of a radio station by and for the Aurora community is an interesting one, but it's too bad it couldn't get off the ground on surer footing than this.

This gaping discrepancy was not the piece de resistance of communications at July's Council session, however. That singular honour goes to the two gentlemen appearing before Council on behalf of Canada Post to address concerns shared by Council and public alike over a lack of communication perceived on the part of the Crown Corporation over their plan to convert all of Canada (with some exceptions for businesses, etc.) to community mailboxes over costly door-to-door delivery service.

As I looked on from the press box, most of the questions posed to them by our elected officials seemed pretty straightforward and to the point. The same cannot be said of the answers they received.

Here's but one example:

I have not received any emails from Canada Post with regards to residents' concerns, said Councillor Thompson. However, I have certainly received lots of emails from residents about their concerns. Has Canada Post been circulating residents' concerns to the Town, the Mayor or members of Council?

You might expect a quick answer, but pull up a seat to take in Canada Post's answer.

In the process we did meet with the Mayor to let him know this was happening. We have had updates. We have talked at the staff level, so we have definitely contacted the Mayor to share what was happening in the community. We were always available to come to Council early in the process, if asked. We were asked to come now. We have come. In hindsight, maybe we should have been here earlier, but the invitation was accepted when it was offered.

So, has Canada Post shared concerns received from residents with their elected officials? Understandably, nobody was exactly clear on that following the answer, but it was easy to see where the answer was ultimately going to land. Enter Mayor Dawe.

Specifically to Councillor Thompson's question: have you circulated any complaints you have received from the public to elected officials at this table? he asked. That would be a yes or a no?

The response: If you're asking if we have received complaints?

The Mayor's intervention: It says right here that you will share residents' feedback with mayors, councillors and city planners. Has any feedback been shared by members of this table?

Hold onto your hat: I do have a list of emails for Aurora which have been shared with the Mayor. At the same time, we have shared them with the engineering department. There has been dialogue as we have gone through the process.

Mayor Dawe: That wasn't the question. Have you had resident feedback that has been shared with us?

Canada Post: Yeah, as far as large sites and smaller sites, it is all on our website and it is all available to the public.

Mayor Dawe, cutting through the bull: The answer is no.

If Canada Post's representatives wrote down their non-answers verbatim, slapped a stamp or two on them, and sent them into Aurora Town Hall, chances are the postal system wouldn't be in the financial mess it is in now. I am being facetious, of course, but

Tuesday's meeting proved to be a master class on how not to answer a question ? or, more accurately, a case study in the ?Don't let this happen to you!?' chapter of the How Not To Answer A Question handbook.

Despite Council's concerns, Canada Post's plan to eliminate door-to-door mail delivery service marches on. The representatives made a compelling case why belt tightening is really the only way forward for them in ensuring a postal service remains active and available to all Canadians.

There were no shortage of proposals presented to Council on how Canada Post is going to get this belt back a few notches but there was, in my opinion, a missing piece of the puzzle. It might have been there, actually, but it might have been lost in the bafflegab. Namely, how is Canada Post going to stay competitive once the cuts have been made?

The seismic shift of Canadians using electronic means to pay their bills, communicate with one another, and what have you, was a trend ?nobody saw coming?, said Canada Post ? a statement which, I think we can all agree, is significantly debatable. Nevertheless, courier services such as FedEx and UPS seem to be doing very well, seemingly despite the odds.

Surely it might be a good idea to see what other companies providing similar services are doing to stay afloat. If Canada Post is concerned that more and more Canadians are looking to other avenues to send their mail, whether lettermail or parcels, jacking up the price of the services you provide, including the amount it will take to send a letter anywhere in Canada, is not the best way to get former customers beating a line back to those ubiquitous red boxes.