

BROCK'S BANTER: Magic Bullet?

By Brock Weir

Maybe 2014 is Aurora's year. Or maybe I am just optimistic.

After all, after losing the fight to keep Aurora intact as far as Federal ridings go, and after losing the fight to keep Aurora's main post office open, and losing the inexplicable fight to do something ? anything ? about a cell phone tower in a neighbouring township, we're bound to catch a break one of these days. Right?

Hopefully that break will come with Aurora and Newmarket's bid to become Ontario's latest university community, with some crucial backing from King Township and Southlake Regional Health Centre.

Looking over the details of the bid made public thus far over the last few days, I have found it a compelling, and slightly surprising, pitch.

A university campus has been a long-stated objective and there has been no shortage of suggestions for when, and if, the opportunity arose, how it could be brought to fruition. Some people with grand visions of what it could bring to the community stated publically their ideal and logical location would be land near State Farm's headquarters at Highway 404.

Others, however, wanted a campus more in the thick of things and suggested that what was once a vacant Cartwright Building was the ideal location to gain somewhat of a foothold in the university game. Its impending transformation into a community healthcare hub, however, ultimately took that option out of the equation.

Over the last two months, two other contenders have joined the conversation, namely the Hallmark Building near Industrial Parkway South and Vandorf Road, and select parcels of land along Bloomington Road, each option with its own backers and detractors.

What we got in this bid, of course, was none of these options but one no less intriguing: a parcel of land straddling both municipalities, complete with mature trees, some sort of a stream, and other features to boast about.

DETAILS (AND A POSSIBLE ELECTION) AHOY!

One thing which has so far been kept under wraps are the negotiations underway to secure the land by both Towns for this purchase. The land in question is currently privately owned. Possible price tags have been bandied about on the blogosphere, but these numbers vary in range by \$4 million.

Proponents of the plan, however, confirmed negotiations to secure the land are ongoing, and will continue until the land is either secured or the joint bid is off the table.

If Aurora makes the shortlist this week, negotiations are likely to continue while York University and the Province of Ontario continue to weigh their top two contenders. If the land deal closes before the Province makes up its mind, the land is secured. The big question, on the other hand, is what happens to the land if it is secured by both Towns, and the golden ticket is eventually handed to a bid from a neighbouring municipality?

If trends continue, one can't see unloading these lands for other purposes, perhaps for future development, as a large hurdle to clear, but it is certainly something to consider.

The Provincial Government, after all, is handing down its budget next week Thursday. In a couple of weeks, a bona fide Provincial Election could be well underway and the victor might not necessarily be as amenable to a York Region university campus as the incumbent.

WHO IS GOING TO PAY FOR IT?

Another detail that still seems to need some ironing out is how the cost of securing the land, and any other incentives that might be thrown in York University's direction will be split between Aurora and Newmarket. Aurora CAO Neil Garbe estimates that, when it comes to topography, the 60 acres in question are likely to be spread out 50-50 between the two municipalities.

Whatever the cost of the land ultimately turns out to be, the obvious source of funding that will immediately come to the minds of residents is the approximately \$34 million sitting in Aurora's Hydro Reserve Account.

This fund was established out of proceeds taken from the sale of Aurora Hydro and has been sitting in a bank account since then. Interest from the account has often been syphoned off to help stabilize the tax rate, but that dependency has been continually weaned over the past few years. The principle, however, remains largely intact.

When it comes to the Hydro Fund, something will ultimately have to give. Unless Aurora wants to sit on the money for a rainy day, and continue to squabble about just how much precipitation would be the threshold, the money will, sooner or later, have to be spent

on something for the public good.

Since its establishment, the Hydro Fund has built up the power to stir unusual passions in people. Residents seem to agree that the money should be used for something, but ultimately coming to a consensus on what it should be used for is another thing altogether. Councillor Buck, for instance, has proposed the money be used to raze the old Aurora Public Library building and, in its stead, build a new multi-use facility that would incorporate arts, provide a youth space, and provide much needed parking. Others, such as Councillor Abel, have agreed something should replace the building, but has invited more debate on what form this should ultimately take.

Over the past two years, significant debate has also turned to whether the Town could reap significant benefit from an equally significant investment from the Hydro Fund in creation of the Hillary-McIntyre Park concept, which would bring together three historic properties on Yonge Street into a four acre heritage park.

Public opinion seems to have either languished or soured on that last concept, depending on who one talks to, but if the university proposal ultimately requires an infusion from the Hydro Fund, that would, in my mind, be the most practical suggestion for it thus far.

MAGIC BULLET?

No one would have the naiveté to suggest a university campus shared by Aurora and Newmarket would be any sort of magic bullet for any and all problems that might be faced by the two municipalities. However, I am confident it would go a hell of a long way in solving a great deal of challenges.

In my experience, places where universities expand into places perceived to be in a decline, such as Aurora's Downtown Core, experience something of a renaissance. 'Gentrification' is often the buzzword and it happens more often than not.

Enterprising individuals would likely seize the opportunity by taking on some of Aurora's empty storefronts and converting them into university-related businesses such as campus bookstores. Students with the entrepreneurial spirit will also want to look for places to call their own, such as cafes, to keep their own student economy afloat, share ideas, and create a vibrant off-campus community.

A university campus could also go a long way to provide incentives for intensification and the creation of more affordable housing in the area as these students will obviously need some place to live. People can't bank on the assumption an Aurora-Newmarket campus would largely serve York Region kids who want to commute to school from the comforts of their parents' homes. It would also spur the rental markets ? including the drive to have fully approved and inspected second suites ? creating a wealth of opportunities for students and the population as a whole.

And, it could put bottoms into all those empty York Region Transit buses which circulate throughout the community.

The Aurora-Newmarket Bid might be successful, it might not, but it is a damned good idea.