

BROCK'S BANTER: Raw Materials

By Brock Weir

Aurora seems like a starting point for many things.

For some people, it is a bedroom community where they can catch a few winks, catch up with the family, and maybe catch up with some yard work before heading off to their ultimate destination during the week.

For others, Aurora is a place where you spend your formative years before heading out to university, college, or the big, bad world. Despite seeing more and more people coming back to where they grew up to plant roots of their own, there has been a distinct theme over the last decade on how to reverse the trend.

The term 'destination' has become synonymous with efforts on how to bring people in or back in to Aurora over the last decade. We have seen it used most recently in the last week over discussions around the Council table to bring a Fab Lab to the heart of Aurora on the site of the old Public Library Building. Proponents of exploring the plan, at the very least, have argued it would draw Aurorans into the downtown core, as well as people from further afield who might want to broaden their horizons, test out whether their own ideas would be feasible when put to the ultimate test in the Fab Lab, or simply be a part of what could be a significant 'learning hub' when combined with the nearby Aurora Cultural Centre and the Aurora Public Library.

The word 'destination' has also been floated around over the last month with efforts to secure a heritage designation for Aurora's pet cemetery in the south end of town. Proponents of the plan have said it will serve as a 'destination' for tourists coming from within and outside Aurora, whether they want to learn more about their community and the families who made it tick, have an affinity for either pets or cemeteries, or happen to be from that strange breed of people who get their kicks touring cemeteries dressed like people with the distinct misfortune of being turned away from a Black Sabbath concert.

Then there is the thorny issue of the Hillary-McIntyre Heritage Park.

Now, let me just say on the outset to clear up some misconceptions that have popped up in the community, that I am not opposed to the park idea itself. I think, if done right, it could be a huge boon to Aurora and something that could be enjoyed by generations to come. That being said, I think considerable time and money was wasted in order to get to where the plan currently stands.

Those who support the idea argue that it will be, yes, a 'destination' for people within the Town, a 'destination' to get people to stay in Town, and a 'destination' for people looking to spend the day moseying around town, shopping and, in turn, invest their hard-earned dollars into the municipality's economy.

That, however, will still be a long time coming if indeed it is brought to fruition at all.

The problem is we have, at the absolute barest of minimums, three distinct groups with three distinct projects, three distinct plans to realise their dream but, at the end of the day, they only have one ultimate objective: creating a destination.

While Aurora focuses on master plans coming out the wazoo, ranging from the Aurora Promenade Plan to the incubating Cultural Master Plan, both documents which will ultimately have plenty of crossover potential, perhaps it is now time to merge all associated plans into one to ultimately focus on making the Town a destination.

The plans are there, the raw materials are there, but now it is time to focus.

This past weekend was as strong an indication as any that it is possible.

It was, of course, the eighth annual installment of Doors Open Aurora. Rescheduled for August this year, rather than July or September, the organizers' objective was to bring out more people from Aurora and bring in more people from surrounding areas. The change seems to have done the trick with many stops along the way noting huge increases of people turning out - some with numbers twofold over 2012.

As I walked around from place to place speaking to several people following their own paths from stop to stop (I focused my attention on people depending on how firmly they seemed to grip their Doors Open maps - that's how you know they meant business!) on what brought them out, it struck me that this year there was a surge of people from well beyond Aurora - Stouffville, Toronto, Brampton, New Tecumseth, and even Trenton and Merrickville - who were attracted to one destination on the tour or another, drawn to either its history, architecture, or both.

Nearly every single person on my highly unscientific poll expressed pleasant surprise at just what Aurora had to offer. One woman I spoke to, who was taking in the Doors Open tour while taking a much needed break from house hunting, said on Saturday morning Aurora wasn't even on her shortlist of places to move, but was quickly rising through the ranks.

If Aurora's future is contingent, at least in part, over finding something - anything! - to make the town a 'destination' for people far and wide, it is time to stop looking at things solely from an economic perspective, solely from a heritage position, and certainly not

as personal hobby horses, to have a plan that would serve all these competing interests for the greater good.