

BROCK'S BANTER: Roll out the red carpet

By Brock Weir

Nearly two years ago, as Aurora Council debated the merits of going forward with a Youth Centre, or a Community Space for Youth, at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex, Councillor John Gallo opined, "There is a gap in terms of how we're dealing with our youth today. Maybe we need some other people to advise us on how to fill that gap."

This was in mid-April 2012.

At the time, I questioned why this Council hadn't taken a golden opportunity at the time to renew an initiative brought forward by Al Wilson in the last months of the previous Council term for Youth Councillors to have that ready voice of younger Aurorans right at the table.

It would have provided Council the chance to hear what this demographic wanted in a Youth Centre while giving potential leaders of tomorrow a chance to shine and make contributions to public discourse.

If some Councillors were looking for "some other people" to advise them on how to fill that gap, they should have been overjoyed when several Aurora students from a wide cross-section of area high schools came forward to say they wanted to take on the challenge.

While the majority of Councillors saw this as the golden opportunity it was, some were a bit less than enthusiastic.

And, if you get down to it, one even seemed dismayed by the entire idea.

As the debate swirled in the third hour at last week's Council meeting, I became dismayed by some of the arguments Councillor Paul Pirri made against this idea.

"I have always been opposed to the concept of a Youth Council or a Youth Committee for the same reason I would be opposed to a strictly seniors committee, or a committee for women," he said. "I feel it marginalizes individuals and ultimately if the individuals in the community have opinions, they should be brought forward as individuals rather than just youth. Youth can contribute just as well as other individuals around the table."

While there was more than a kernel of truth in Councillor Pirri's argument, it is an argument which simply does not hold water in practice.

Any committee, by its very nature, marginalizes some individuals, or, at the very least caters to a specific segment of the population which excludes another.

Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee, a statutory committee required by the Province, is populated, in addition to their Council representative, by individuals who experience "or have family members who experience" accessibility challenges in their day to day lives.

Aurora's Trails and Active Transportation Committee is largely comprised of the same handful of individuals in this community who have become synonymous with trail advocacy and other environmental issues.

It would also be unlikely for members of the Heritage Advisory Committee not to have a certain appreciation for where Aurora has been and, on that front, where it is going.

These groups do not marginalize anyone from taking part, but the reality is to make the effort to apply for Committee membership, you are more than likely to have a vested interest in the subject matter.

As was pointed out in last week's debate by Councillor Michael Thompson, there is nothing, in theory, stopping youth from applying to become members of any of Aurora's advisory committees. They do not have to be the age of majority.

One supposes they don't have to have any particular background in the field they want to be discussing, but it is hard to imagine that such qualifications to not play a part in the closed door Council meetings which ultimately decide which applicants will be accepted to the committee.

But, let's put ourselves back into the shoes of these high school students and think, which one of us at that age would have decided to take the plunge, apply, and sit at the table as the lone voice representing our demographic?

In many cases, one would be sitting amongst experts who have years of experience in their field.

As friendly and accommodating as historians "and Heritage Advisory Committee members" John McIntyre and Jacqueline Stuart are, and as friendly and accommodating as environmentalist Judy Gilchrist is on her respective committee, it could be a daunting and intimidating prospect for any high school student to really feel comfortable speaking up and saying what is on their mind.

While Councillor Pirri argues that having a Youth Committee would marginalize in the same way as a Seniors' Committee or a Women's Committee would, and perhaps he is right as far as gender-specific committees go, but doesn't Aurora already have a

de-facto Seniors' Committee in the form of the Aurora Seniors' Association?

Sure, it is not a committee specifically designated by the Town of Aurora to address seniors' issues in Aurora, but that hasn't stopped them from becoming an organized voice in this community to advocate on behalf of, and for, seniors issues.

Their collective voices have gone a long way in bettering their lot, including securing new bocce courts at the Seniors' Centre, the adaptation of a municipally-owned tennis court to accommodate the flourishing new sport of pickleball, and commandeered elbow room in the Community Space for Youth to accommodate bursting-at-the-seems senior programming when youth are ostensibly in school.

Why shouldn't young Aurorans be afforded with the same voice within this Town?

Many decisions in Aurora, pending or otherwise, could greatly benefit from having the voice of the youth behind it. While the Youth Centre/Community Space for Youth ship has sailed, this voice could be an influential one in steering it for the future. They would also be invaluable for their input into documents such as the Aurora Cultural Master Plan and Community Improvement plan. After all, who would be better positioned to tell lawmakers what would entice them and their peers to take part in all Aurora has to offer and, when ready to join the workforce, seek out opportunities close to home.

And who better to task with going into the schools, talking to physically challenged students, parents, and others on whether Aurora will get good bang from their buck transforming Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park into an accessibility playground?

Perhaps the most enticing prospect of all is this group of students want to bring their own issues, and their own concerns, to the table, not just provide input on what's currently on the backburner at Town Hall. For a group which often ponders the best way to engage and reach out to all segments of the community, there should be no hesitation whatsoever in Council welcoming them to the table.

In fact, they should bring out their Dustbusters and roll out the red carpet.

CORRECTION

As a matter of clarification, it has been brought to The Auroran's attention that in last week's article on expenses by Council and Committee members, the \$140 attributed to Heritage Advisory Committee member Bob McRoberts was not a reimbursement for the purchase of six copies of his book, Postcards of Olde Aurora for the Aurora Public Library, and an honorarium for a presentation he made on the same subject. In addition, the \$130.63 the article attributed as a reimbursement to Council candidate and Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC) member Svetla Topouzova, was actually a reimbursement to former EAC member Charles Levine. We apologise for the error.