

BROCK'S BANTER: Strike while the iron's hot...

Strike while the iron is hot -- but not flaming

By Brock Weir

It is an oft-repeated refrain in Aurora ? and admittedly in this column as well ? that it is hard to get new residents involved in the community around them.

This argument is most prevalent after an election season or a particular budget cycle where (a) people often sound off about a low voter turnout or (b) complain about the results of the annual municipal budget despite not taking Aurora up on any of the multiple opportunities afforded to them to actually make a meaningful impact on the final tally.

As I gradually lost feeling in my hands in the gradually more bitter cold last Wednesday for the Town's annual Tree Lighting Ceremony (it didn't seem as cold as it was when I left the house. I swear), I was reminded once again that this particular event is an exception to the rule.

In fact, if you want to get a good handle on what turns the respective cranks of new residents of Aurora, or perhaps families that don't often engage in community events or other civic opportunities, the annual Tree Lighting Ceremony is truly where it's at. Every year, I am surprised anew by the number of new faces in the crowd and in talking to them, they affirm that, more often than not, this is the very first time they have made their way to John West Way to take in an event such as this.

It was a very encouraging sight.

Less encouraging, however, was the slightly dark, macabre turn the event took as the crowds disbursed, with half heading to the warmth of the Aurora Seniors' Centre to hear ?Twas the Night Before Christmas, as read by Mrs. Claus, and a production of Dr. Seuss' seasonal classic, and the other half sticking around for a very entertaining fire eating and fire juggling demonstration.

Things were going very well until one kid shouted out from the crowd, ?You're going to die!?, which is not very encouraging for a man trying to get on a very tall unicycle, much less a man getting on a very tall unicycle while quite literally playing with fire. This started a trend. By the time he was up on his perch with the fire in hand, this lone voice turned into a chant of ?You're going to die!?

Our future voters are going to be a very entertaining lot! Nevertheless, it was all in good fun. And it would have brought immense pride to Wednesday and Pugsley Addams. But, fortunately, it did not devolve into the Thanksgiving scene from ?Addams Family Values.?

While municipal taxes and those who sit around the decision-making table might not be as sexy as a mystical bearded man in a red velvet suit (no disrespect to the nine members that fill the Council chamber week in and week out, of course!), it proves that with the right combination of attractions, community engagement can indeed be part of ?starting a new tradition.?

Now, it is incumbent on Town Council and staff to come up with new and creative ways to harness that energy in the years ahead without, of course, being too in-your-face or crass about soliciting opinions. But, it is always good to strike while the iron is hot. Which brings me to the second installment of my Council wishlist.

Last week, inspired by that man in the red velvet suit, I put forward a few items I dearly wish this newly elected Council will settle in and tackle over the next four years.

One item was the open dialogue, another was a firm decision one way or another on the future of Library Square, and the third was bridging any gaps between the east and west spheres of Aurora.

HYDRO FUNDS

It seems inevitable that one of the first issues this Council will have to tackle will be an onslaught of ideas on how Aurora's \$34M, and growing, Hydro Reserve Funds, created from the proceeds stemming from the sale of Aurora Hydro should be used. One suggestion likely to crop up in the weeks ahead will be a plea or two from members of the soon-to-be-established Highland Gate Ratepayers Association on using a potential chunk of the funds to purchase the lands of the defunct golf course to preserve green space and provide potential future recreational use, a suggestion which is just as likely to be a bone of contention.

Next week, Council is slated to tackle a notice of motion from Councillor John Abel seeking a report on the purchase of two heritage properties on Yonge Street, north of Wellington. While there are numerous options, Hydro would be one of the more obvious contenders to finance such a purchase if the report bears fruit.

Over the last term, Council solicited a number of suggestions from residents on what they would like to see done with the money, and the residents responded in kind. Their suggestions, thus far, have come to naught. It will be incumbent on this Council to decide

whether or not they want to do something tangible with the money for what they believe will be in the best interests of residents, or to use it in less tangible ways for that noble purpose.

Without firm direction or vision, this substantial pot of gold will continue to appear to be the magic silver bullet many people turn to in order to back a serious proposal or a flight of fancy.

REGIONAL REPRESENTATION

With the new Regional Chair due to be appointed this Thursday at Regional Council's regularly scheduled meeting, Aurora will still have but one voice around the table. Mayor Dawe's voice might be a strong one, but it is one he has admitted can only go so far when duties at the Town level might impede him from making it to a Regional Council or Committee Meeting.

In the last term of Council, members endorsed a request to the powers-that-be to consider adding an additional member for Aurora around that table, joining a chorus of similar singularly-represented municipalities around York Region, seeing adequate representation by population.

While this request was denied by Regional Council as a whole, with a new Chair and a few new members, the climate at the Newmarket headquarters might now be more amenable to productive discussion. Again, it is time to strike while the iron is hot ? and do it early and often.

The worst they can do is say no. Again.