

BROCK'S BANTER: The Money Pit?

By Brock Weir

In the course of their terms as Aurora's lawmakers, Councillors invariably develop a makeshift brand of shorthand to get their points across.

Variations on 'we're putting the cart before the horse' are often deployed to get a fellow Councillor to stop in their tracks, as are phrases like 'we're throwing good money after bad' and 'I'm looking to something new to hang my hat on.'

While putting a cart on either end of the horse has rarely been a personal consideration, I would be lying if I said the other two did not cross my mind listening to Councillors debate Aurora's planned 'Community Space for Youth' last week.

Speaking against recommendations to increase the price tag for the project by \$2.6 million, Councillor John Gallo said he 'nearly fell off his chair' reading the report.

Perhaps it was a slight exaggeration. I can't imagine anyone would have been caught completely off guard at the increased price tag. This is, after all, a plan to revamp the well-used Aurora Family Leisure Complex and tack additions onto a building which this Council gave serious consideration to mothballing and starting fresh just two years ago.

Was it really beyond the realm of possibility that a building roundly criticised for being inaccessible, not user-friendly and well past its sell-by date might cost a pretty penny to bring fully up to code?

Councillors arguing in favour of going ahead with the increased price last week, including the Mayor, argued that the extra \$2.6 million would ensure the building would be fresh and usable for a further 30 - 50 years.

It is a nice sentiment and one which makes sense in theory, but it was a sentiment originally shared when this building was constructed in the late 1980s. Although residents have made good use out of the building, the honeymoon between the building and the people it was intended to serve quickly soured. As did its relationship with the people that put it there.

Nevertheless, Council has spoken. More money will be invested - with the best of intentions, I am sure - in revitalizing the building. It will be more accessible, interior facilities are promised to be brighter, and the youth will have a place to go.

From my perspective - and it is a perspective that has been consistent - the plan is akin to slapping a fresh coat of paint onto the Titanic as the violinists prepare their last encore.

IT'S NOT ALL BAD

Had I fallen off my chair while reading the report, I would have picked myself up and dusted myself off, heartened in the fact that local high school kids have indeed been involved in steering a facility which at least part of is ultimately intended for them.

When Councillors took the 'show on the road' to local high schools last winter, students came up with a list of wonderful ideas from a climbing wall and a snack bar, and both are included in the plan.

Their voices have been heard. They have made their mark on the designs. Now, the next steps will be for the construction tenders to be awarded in October. If all goes according to plan, the new constructions will be complete by the end of Fall 2014.

Then it is time to play the waiting game. To borrow an equally hackneyed phrase so often used by Council: if they build it, will they come?

On that point, I am still unconvinced.

While young Aurorans will undoubtedly find a haven in the adjacent skateboard park, and there might be some initial novelty in having a climbing wall at a better price-point, I wonder whether youth will really embrace a 'dedicated youth space' lost within a much larger facility.

It is hardly the kind of place where they can just drop in, hang out, perhaps bring a guitar for an impromptu jam session, or just unwind, that youth seem to want.

I will, however, hope for the best and would truly love to be proven wrong.

Nothing yet, however, has convinced me that this will not evolve from a 'dedicated youth space' to merely an annex to the already overused Aurora Seniors' Centre in 18 months and then we'll be back where we started.

Councillors hoping to hang their hats on this Youth Centre as an election platform next year might be in luck if construction continues well past October and there will be time yet for it to be realised as an avoidable disaster.

At that point, it might be up to the next Council to say once again, 'You know what Aurora really needs? A Youth Centre' and then the arguments will begin again.

Hopefully in time, someone will eventually get it right. They might consider building a separate building, tacking an addition onto a place which has a bit more of a spring in its step, and is both centrally located and easy to get to.

This plan will be a boon to kids in the immediate area, but those from other parts of the Town hoping to make good use out of their own space better hope they have either a willing parent to get them there, or a change of heart from York Region Transit to provide bus service to the Youth Centre other than at times when they are largely stuck in the confines of the classroom.