

BROCK'S BANTER: The Northern Light?

By Brock Weir

When it rains it pours ? and, in Aurora's case, especially when the sun is shining.

If you had no particular plans to get away for the weekend, there was plenty over the last few days to keep you occupied, whether you trekked into Sheppard's Bush for a tasty stack of pancakes and sausage whipped up by the Aurora Lions, spent a 10 minutes at the Aurora Public Library honing a new skill, taking in a skilled concert at Town Park courtesy of St. Andrew's College, or getting new backyard and household ideas at the remarkable annual Aurora Home Show, hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce. My weekend began at the latter, as it often does each year, taking in the new and creative displays that fill up the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex. Each year, there are new and interesting products to catch the eye and usually the vendors go to new lengths to keep whatever product or service they are hawking fresh and exciting.

This year was no exception.

As I toured around the arena floors with a couple of colleagues, we began keeping mental tallies of what communities each vendor came from. So many came from Aurora, but there were dozens of vendors from Newmarket, and even further afield. One, we noted, had even come as far as Niagara Falls to sell her photographic chalkboards.

Such is the draw of the Aurora Home Show.

But, there was a trend to note.

Of the out-of-towners, the majority came from Newmarket. That is not surprising in any way, of course, but what was slightly surprising was the tone in one of our group's voice.

It seemed the very mention of flourishing businesses along Newmarket's bustling Main Street garnered a slightly dismissive chuckle ? not a chuckle at what Newmarket has been able to achieve along its main drag, but simply what seemed like a built-in bias against our neighbours to the north, developed simply by nature of living in Aurora for more than a decade.

It was, in the end, simply a reflex, and the resurgence of Main Street Newmarket was duly ? and I don't think grudgingly ? appreciated.

Friday night's exchange reminded me of another exchange which took place a few days earlier at Tuesday evening's marathon four-plus hour Council meeting, at which just a handful of items of significance were discussed. Outside of nearly 90 minutes of discussion over two homes on Machell Avenue, the majority of the discussion zeroed in on two issues: Mavrillac Park, and whether or not to implement internet voting in time for the next municipal election.

Last week, I predicted this last item, like so many, would be deferred to another day pending at least one further staff discussion. It was a safe bet, I thought, as so many good ideas die this way, but I was surprised to see the matter voted down outright ? at least, pending a final decision this week, and this is being written prior to the final outcome.

Aurora, as of late, seems to be on a communications kick. With a new Manager of Corporate Communications in place, everything seemed to be on track. Ideas bandied about by elected officials on new and innovative ways of communicating with residents were finally gaining traction by the people able to implement such plans, new and exciting ideas from staff were being considered, and residents were also being engaged on topics they previously were not.

It seemed to me that broadening the way residents are able to cast their respective votes would be carried along with this current ? after all, what better way is there to communicate with your constituents than making them able to have their say as quick, convenient and painless as possible.

Alas, unless there is a radical change in direction this week (and watch this space next week) it was not to be.

In the end, Councillors seemed to get gun-shy about implementing an internet voting system at the mere mention of security issues. Perhaps slightly tongue-in-cheek, Councillor Kim brought up the thorny issue of Russian hacking. Let's face it, the Russians are hacking far bigger fish than municipal councils. Then, Councillor Thom referenced six and seven year old case studies which showed how internet voting systems could be manipulated without any reference to more recent examples. That was, however, enough to cook this particular goose.

Speaking in favour of the plan, Mayor Dawe offered that security over such system markedly improves every six month cycle, and noted Markham has been using internet voting for a while and Newmarket recently adopted the system ahead of 2018.

?I don't think we're, frankly, any different from Markham or Newmarket, except perhaps in terms of size,? he said, suggesting there might even be cost savings for both Aurora and Newmarket if we partnered up on software and system management.

?Just to change our system because Newmarket is doing it, I don't think that is good enough,? said Councillor Thom.

As it happened, that wasn't actually an argument offered by anyone, but it stuck.

It's always nice to be ahead of the curve, but the way I am feeling at the moment I would rather be on the curve or behind the curve for something like this," added Councillor Gaertner. "The way I am thinking about this now is there is just too much room for error." This situation is, in my opinion, emblematic of a perennial problem in Aurora. A healthy skepticism of what Newmarket does aside, there is a renewed reluctance to take risks, however, minor, to get ahead of that curve and, as a result, Aurora is being left behind it in so many ways.

While Newmarket rakes in dozens of awards, citations and honourable mentions each year for their innovation, creativity and "and I hate to use this phrase "thinking outside the box, Aurora is stuck on taking bold steps.

Whether it is a fear of disrupting the comfort zones of residents in light of the fact we're just over a year away from constituents going back to the polls, fear of having egg on one's face if a bold move turns out to be a misstep, or delaying and delaying items hoping others solve the problem for them, we're getting further and further behind that mythical curve and there will come a time that despite the distance between ourselves and that curve there will be absolutely no room for error.

ON A FINAL NOTE

On a final note, I would like to send out best wishes to my parents as they each celebrate milestone birthdays this week. Born five years apart and very happily divorced, my mom reaches her milestone on Thursday while my dad hits his on Friday, making the week of April 27 and 28 of each year very busy for this offspring "and perhaps a good example of bad family planning. Nevertheless, it is a nice time of year with a lot of love to go around. So, Happy Birthday, Mom! and Happy Birthday, Dad! I won't sign "with love" as it will spoil the image of this jaded, hardened editor, but you know how I feel!