

BROCK'S BANTER: The Suggestion Box Runneth Over

By Brock Weir

Chances are, if you have ever been a member of any sphere of the workforce you have experienced the office meeting loop. That is, an instance where a conference has been convened regarding a specific identified problem with an agenda devoted solely to finding its solution.

Of course, what transpires during said meeting typically follows a standard format: diagnoses are bandied about as if you have just plugged your latest nasty rash into WebMD; prescriptions, like pasta, are thrown against the wall to see what sticks; and these noodles of suggestions are scraped from the plaster, thrown into a pot, and set in the fridge for a time, in the futile hope that the best among them will rise to the top with minimal fuss.

We all know that never happens.

Untended, the chilling pasta congeals invariably into a solid starchy brick that is less than palatable. And, when this is discovered, it's time to repeat the whole process again.

Lo and behold, the problem has not solved itself; a meeting is called, symptoms are prescribed, cures are thrown around willy-nilly, and they're shelved once again.

Eventually, participants in the meeting get tired of spinning the wheel and the numbers that turn out dwindle with each revolution. You could have heard a pin drop in Council Chambers on Thursday night as Councillors Michael Thompson and Tom Mrakas held an open house-cum-roundtable discussion on the future of Library Square and Aurora's Downtown Core in the context of Aurora's Cultural Precinct.

How do we revitalize Aurora's Downtown Core?

How do we get people to come in, stay for a while and spend money?

How do we create additional parking?

Is there a need for more parking?

What should be done with the old Aurora Public Library building on Victoria Street and the old Aurora Seniors' Centre building next door?

Conversations around the above questions elicited no end of discussion with very serious, passionate and intriguing ideas offered by very serious and passionate individuals.

Some of their ideas were a bit grandiose for the topics at hand, such as trying to re-create Kensington Market in our little burgh, or some of the most fashionable tourist destinations and hot spots in London (plot twist: London, England, rather than Ontario) but most were practical, sensible, and attainable.

These conversations ground to a significant halt, however, when Aurora resident Nancee Webb ? who led a lively break-out discussion on the above questions with Councillors Wendy Gaertner and Sandra Humfries earlier in the evening, took the floor with a question of her own.

?How many of the people here are business owners from the Downtown Core?? she asked.

Crickets.

I expected a sea of hands to go up ? after all, these are questions with a direct relation to their livelihoods ? but not one showed up. Granted, Gabriel Schacher of Gabriel's Café at Yonge and Wellington was in attendance earlier in the evening, as well as two or three real estate agents with a vested interest in the area, but not a single arm was raised in response to Ms. Webb's question.

That, to me, was an astounding revelation but one, in retrospect, that should have been anything but.

This brief scene, only minutes in duration, rendered all the other questions posed to the crowds last week irrelevant, in my opinion. Without interest from the business community most immediately impacted by any revitalization efforts of Downtown Aurora, there will be no buy-in towards any of the interesting suggestions residents offer for the area. And, without that buy in, the area will be in a holding pattern for another 20 years.

It proved that the most vital questions Aurora should be asking are not what we, as a collective, can do to revitalize our historic business centre, bring more people in, or spend money; rather, the question should be, what can Aurora do to re-engage and revitalize the interests of its non-residential stakeholders?

These non-residential stakeholders, whether they are business-owners, tenants or landlords, hold the keys to the kingdom. If they own the land, increased traffic and beautification would only make their investments more attractive. If they are renting commercial space, they are the ones who would most immediately benefit from foot traffic. In its absence, are the ones left to pack up and move

on.

With this in mind, it is hard to accept that these all-important players in this long-running drama do not feel that they have a vested interest in its outcome. To hear the Councillors organizing last week's meeting tell it, the business owners were certainly aware of the session, so there is another factor to consider.

It seems a safe bet that these business owners are like the office drones who attend office meeting after office meeting and find that their suggestions are never actually acted upon. Their suggestions have been taken in each and every year for the past 17 years and they have seen nothing brought to fruition.

Who could blame them for being a little tired of playing the game?

In the meantime, they continue to plug away trying to make their businesses viable, maintain the facades of their investments (or not, depending on their level of discontent), and give the downtown core an often ill-fated vote of confidence when they make their investment.

I would be tired too.

As of Monday night, Council met to finally make a decision to take a bulldozer to the two blights on Library Square, hoping it is the catalyst ? along with some enhancements to Town Park and the adjacent former armoury ? for everything to fall into place.

It might be, and it certainly couldn't hurt. If anything, those two buildings have been two significant stumbling blocks, but once those are out of the way, the top priority should be to re-engage the downtown business owners who, in all appearances, have washed their hands of the entire affair.

Aurora's new Economic Development Officer, set to come on board in 2017, will have many doors on which to knock.