

BROCK'S BANTER: Time to talk about food donations

By Brock Weir

The hibernation mode is settling in.

As the weather gets colder and the days get shorter and shorter minutes at a time up until next Wednesday, a strange feeling descends. It's never a lack of energy ? well, rarely ? but an insatiable need to curl up and tackle my stack of unread books that has grown steadily over the last eleven months.

This feeling is exacerbated by the snowfall, which so many of us awoke to early on Monday to dig out.

Grumbling about it?

Sure, I heard a few, but as midnight came onto the horizon on Sunday night, I was all too eager to get a head-start on my digging.

Regular readers of this column will know all too well ? perhaps to their dismay ? that I am an ardent fan of the winter. There is nothing better than the feeling of snow crunching underfoot or the first second or two after you leave your warm house into the frigid outdoor air to have the inside of your nose freeze ever so slightly the briefest of moments.

So, when the sky was glowing with illuminated snowflakes, I couldn't resist a good shovel.

As I began the cleanup, I kept considering an article I read earlier in the day in the context of the week that had just ended.

Despite our (my?) feeling of onset hibernation, the reality is few people have time to give into those urges at this time of year. If we're not Christmas shopping, we're getting ready for the holiday in other ways, or making the rounds every variety of Christmas/Holiday/Festive Cheer soiree thrown our way.

That was certainly how things were rolling in my case, but this was coupled, as you will see in this week's Auroran, with covering a number of initiatives going on in our community to make sure this Festive Cheer is spread as far and wide as possible, whether it is a donated Christmas tree, the collection of gift cards and toys, or random acts of kindness.

As such, my eye was drawn to an opinion piece by Tristin Hopper and published throughout Postmedia with the evocative title: ?For the love of God, stop donating canned goods to the food bank.?

In the piece, Hopper highlights the myriad ways Canadians give to their local food banks, from large scale food drives to the odd buy-in at the annual office Christmas party.

?Now, don't get me wrong,? writes Hopper. ?Donating to charity is a good thing, particularly during the holidays when many charities budget for yuletide donations. But, the simple rules of economics are begging you: give money to food banks, rather than food.

?Canned goods have a particularly low rate of charitable return. They're heavy, they're awkward, and they can be difficult to fit into the family's meal plan. Worst of all, the average consumer is buying those canned goods at four to five times the rock-bottom bulk price that can be obtained by the food bank itself.

?Put yourself in the place of a food bank that has just accepted an anarchic 40-pound box of random food from an office fundraiser. It's got pie filling, Kraft Dinner, beans, pumpkin and chick peas. All those items need to be sorted, stored, inventoried, and then shoehorned into the food bank's distribution schedule. It's bad form to have low-income families eat nothing but creamed corn until the stocks run dry, so some items move faster than others.

?Consider the herculean plight of the food bank warehouse manager, and it's easy to imagine how a particularly unhelpful box of food could end up doing nothing but wasting a bunch of people's time before it ends up shunted into a dumpster.?

These problems have been identified for years, Hopper writes, before speculating on the reasons why such donations persist. Among the conclusions are charities being ?extremely leery? about telling people how to donate, and ?people don't trust charities,? meaning they would rather make a tangible donation than make a bank transfer or a throw a gift card into a box. Then, of course, there was the feeling of dogoodery one feels when throwing a can of soup or a box of pasta into a box compared to gift card.

At first I thought the article was something of a humbug at this time of year. The points made, of course, were all sound and logical, but I thought there was one missing element to it: the awareness that can be generated in just about any forum from a traditional food drive.

Year in and year out, whenever a charity is highlighted in our municipality, we always hear the same thing, ?I always thought Aurora was such an affluent community.? In the grand scheme of things, that is obviously a true statement, but drives such as these serve to highlight it is not universal.

Mulling these thoughts over the weekend, I reached out to the executive directors of both the Aurora Food Pantry and the York Region Food Network, both based in Aurora, both tackling the issue of hunger in very different ways. Joan Stonehocker of the York

Region Food Network, said there are many reasons why money is better for food banks as food drives around Christmas and Thanksgiving are so successful they are often 'hard pressed to sort and store all the donated food' even with a team of volunteers 'I receive calls from social service workers and individuals who are without food and looking for grocery cards because food banks can be difficult to access (limited hours, transportation issues, highly processed food),' responded Ms. Stonehocker. 'We need to be moving from the charitable food bank model to sustainable, systemic solutions.

'Although food bank staff and volunteers might be 'good shoppers' they are still often buying non-perishable, processed foods to restock shelves. Imagine, if we gave people that are forced to access food banks grocery cards so that they can purchase food in the grocery store like everyone else. The health benefits of being able to choose your own food would likely far outweigh the bargain the food bank got on the can of tuna.

'It is time we move from this 'emergency' short term response, second tier food system which provides benefits to volunteers and comfort to those who are able to contribute, but does little to support those forced to use the services.

'The article says that people like to give tins of food to charities because they distrust that the charities will use funds wisely. I think the bigger problem is that people don't trust 'the poor' to use funds wisely. Research on the social determinants of health shows that there are greater benefits to your health from being socially connected rather than quitting smoking. Empowerment and choice are also healthful tonics.

'Food Banks Canada Hunger Reports do not talk about food donations as a solution to the problem 'it's time to shift the conversation and our actions away from emergency, short term responses.'