

BROCK'S BANTER: Torches, Smoke and Mirrors

By Brock Weir

Next week, the 2014-2015 school year will draw to a close.

As I write this, and as you read this, students across Aurora are likely sitting down for a last minute cram session, trying to get every single detail ? no matter how seemingly trivial ? engrained in their grey matter. If they are like me in my final year or two of high school, these cram sessions would go on until I could feel my eyes glaze over, before slamming the book shut for a few hours sleep just waiting to put the last pen mark on that exam paper. Afterwards, there was no greater relief than thinking of one's head as a particular porcelain plumbing feature and visualizing pushing down on the handle; hoping, of course, the most useful pieces of knowledge would be left behind while the useless flotsam would be carried out to parts unknown. For what it's worth, I still am yet to find myself in a situation in my job where everything hinges on finding the area of a triangle, but that is neither here nor there. For our elementary school students, it will be the end of a fraught year. Amid this continuing labour unrest, our scholars in the public school systems will simply find out if they have passed the mustard just enough to get through to that all-important next grade. They might have to wait a while to find out by how far a distance they actually cleared that hurdle. But, things could be worse. They could have ended the year adrift, just getting by on the bare essentials while the adults around them hammer out issues that are, in most cases, a bit beyond their comprehension.

As we progress into next week, I cast my mind back to over five years ago to a cold winter day when students from nearby schools ? elementary and secondary ? made their way to Yonge Street, either on foot or by bus, to watch an endless stream of civic-minded citizens take a torch in hand on the way up Aurora's busiest thoroughfare, those torches, of course, carrying the Olympic flame. Armed only with a simple point and shoot camera at the time, a gadget with a particularly fickle auto-focus feature, it was still easy to capture the expressions of wonderment on the faces of these youngsters, and the young-at-heart adults that came to keep an eye on them. Actually, let's be real ? they too came for the excitement of the occasion.

Five years on, I wonder where many of these faces are today. Are they now one of those students taking a crack at their final exams ready to go off to university or college today? Might they be heading off on an athletic scholarship inspired by the athletic feats carried out by the time that same flame was extinguished in Vancouver? Maybe the younger ones in the crowd are showing promise on their high school sports teams just looking to catch the eye of a scout in a year or two.

Whatever the case, next Thursday will provide a prime opportunity to sow these potential seeds in the next generation as the Pan Am torch makes its way through Aurora. As far as athletes and the sports themselves go, the magnitude of this event almost makes Vancouver 2010 seem like a jamboree by comparison, and there will be even more opportunities to inspire and instill pride. Secondary school students have the day off, but our elementary kids will have to wait until the following day to enjoy their P.A. Day. So, at the end of a tough year for them, make their last day of school count and bring them out to Yonge Street, Wellington Street and Industrial Parkway North to help light those embers within them and, of course, over to Lambert Willson Park for a late morning and early afternoon celebration for the entire community to see that cauldron lit. Think of it as an investment for all of us.

MEANWHILE, AT TOWN HALL?

Aurora's Council Chambers might be fertile ground to instill this kind of passion in local kids too, if they have a yen for gymnastics. On perennial issues that crop up at the Council table ? those issues that are never fully brought in for a safe and controlled landing ? it is often entertaining, if not mildly uncomfortable, to see our elected representatives perform remarkable feats of contortion in order to get their respective points across.

All, with the exception of Councillor Thom, who was absent, were in fine form at last week's Council meeting when the scarred and wounded issue of tree protection once again came into the fore.

The impetus behind this round on the parallel bars lay in a notice of motion from Councillor Gaertner on taking another crack this week at Aurora's Tree Protection Bylaw before it was expected to come back in the fall for further review. This time, however, the focus was specifically on removing golf courses' exemption from the municipal purview.

This is an issue that has been before Council practically since Aurora's air was still perfumed by butane as the Olympic Flame streaked through to Newmarket, being sharply brought back into focus two or three years ago when tree removal in and around Beacon Hall particularly upset nearby residents.

It was encouraging to hear Councillor Abel mention that by September the time might be ripe to get golf course owners on side

about reporting to the Town when they wish to remove trees. Given Council's last attempt at removing this exemption, it will be interesting to see if that actually turns out to be the reality this fall.

As an editor and a reporter still bearing the scars of Council's endless debates over single trees, small groves, or entire woodlots, debates which are often peppered with overheated rhetoric, allegations of fellow Councillors throwing up ?smoke and mirrors? to cloud the issue, and actual tears from residents and Councillors alike, I have yet to hear one sound argument on why golf courses should be the one business exempt from the tree protection bylaw.

There is no doubt golf course owners care deeply about the beauty of the nature on their properties, after all, no paying golfer wants to tee off from a small patch of green in an asphalt jungle. But they are, first and foremost, businesses. Of course, golf courses housing thousands of trees should not be held to the same restrictions as a property owner with less than a handful to call their own, but if Aurora is headed back to the well for another round of consultation with the same players, perhaps time can be spent more productively in coming up with a happy medium.