

BROCK'S BANTER: Ward Cleavers -- Redux

Ward Cleavers: Redux (Pt. 1)

By Brock Weir

There are so few sure things in any life.

Well, the old saying goes that the only sure things in our lives are death and taxes. Perhaps it is a particularly apt phrase to evoke considering the recent passage of the 2014 municipal budget, perhaps it is rubbing salt in a fresh wound, but there are other sure things that can be added to this list.

We knew all along, for instance, that during the darkest, coldest weeks of this past winter that spring would, eventually, in its own due time, even past its own due time, come along to start melting away some of the bleak refuse which made the season almost unbearable.

We also knew, through sheer Canadian grit and determination, that we would come out of the winter on the other side relatively unscathed, although the same cannot necessarily be said about our homes.

We can also be sure that we, as Canadians, will use our Canadian prerogative to complain about the season to anyone who will listen ? and even some that won't ? about what we experienced?unless the person across from you happens to be American. In that case, to keep up the illusion of heartiness, you braved the winter in nothing but a pair of shorts and flip flops. You know who you are.

As of last week, however, I think it is safe to add one further ?sure thing? to the list.

Councillors have formally bitten a long-smoking bullet to finally put to voters the issue of whether or not they would like to implement a ward system in Aurora.

A ward system would do away with the current ?at large? system in which we elect eight Councillors to represent the Town as a whole. Under the new model, should Aurora voters vote in favour of it, somewhere between six and eight Councillors will be elected by specific groups of voters, in geographical areas designated as individual wards, to best represent their interests at Town Hall.

The theory is that an individual Councillor would be there to represent the direct interests of their particular segment of the community and, in turn, residents in each respective ward would know the one person to whom they can turn to represent their interests, initiatives, and so forth, to Council as a whole.

In an ideal ward situation, proponents argue a Ward Councillor could, at least in the same theory, be more available to them, be able to keep better in touch with, and informed of, what their constituents want and also be able to hold public forum meetings to engage their community.

In the Ward System, of course, the Mayor would be elected by the entire community to represent, in turn, the entire community. This is all hypothetical at the moment, and one which will depend on you, the voters, so you might be asking what is so ?sure? about this? 50 per cent of eligible voters need to turn out to the polls for any decision, either for a ward system or against, to be binding. Anything less will leave the issue up to Council to decide one way or another.

Considering the highest voter turnout in recent years is just 41 per cent, it seems pretty sure to me that whether or not to go to a ward system will ultimately be left in Council's hands.

So, now the rest is up to you. Whether you are for a ward system or against, it is now April and you have just over six months to encourage and harangue your friends, family, and neighbours to get off their respective duffs and turn out to the polls on October 27.

It is not that one can't trust Council to make the right decision on the issue, after all, whichever way the referendum question goes will provide a general flavour of the direction Aurora as a whole is leaning, but a good showing at the polls would remove all doubt that going in a new direction or sticking with what we've got was the right decision to make.

MEANWHILE, IN A WARD SYSTEM?

My skepticism over Aurora adopting a ward system has been made clear in this space in the past, but I would be lying if I said I haven't become ?curiouser and curwiouiser? about how a ward system would impact Aurora, and whether it would leave the town better off or worse.

Those who have argued for it are very enthusiastic and since Council formally approved putting a ward system question on the ballot several months ago, I have been listening to debates at Town Hall with an ear tuned slightly more towards how each decision would be impacted if the eight Councillors (or six, depending how the vote goes) were representing specific areas of the community.

Take, for instance, the battle over potential parkland on Mavrincac Boulevard. How would the situation between the Town of Aurora

and Minto Communities have been handled differently if the Mavrinac Boulevard community had just one Councillor there to champion their interests? Don't get me wrong, it did take one specific Councillor to galvanize this community on the issue, but would it have gained the same traction at the table if residents in other wards were vocally more hesitant to take on the developers with as much gusto as Council has done so far?

Now, let's look at the recent controversy over the proposed Southeast Aurora Heritage District.

Had a ward system been implemented many years ago, would residents have been better informed on what was proposed to come? After all, the onus would be particularly on the Councillor or Councillors representing the area in question, to keep his or her constituents up to speed about what was in the works. Would residents have had the same inclination to come to the podium to fight as hard as they did to have an impact on the conversation if they shared the confidence their ward Councillor would do the same for them?

How would the debate have been impacted if residents on the north side of Wellington Street, adamantly opposed to the plan, were represented by one Councillor in their own ward, while another Councillor would champion the interests of constituents on the south side who appear to certainly be more in favour of the plan than their neighbours?

Would the vote for the Community Space for Youth/Youth Centre have shaken down any differently if those who voted against the retrofit of the Aurora Family Leisure Complex were at the table to represent wards with significantly higher proportions of children and seniors?

At the end of the day, that is what I am most curious about and I have to admit I am not as opposed to a ward system as I once was, if only to see benefits or drawbacks in action.

With last week's approval, Municipal Staff have been tasked with developing a non-partisan education campaign to outline the pros and the cons before October's vote. I will be curious to see what that list is and, through the course of debates, whether residents will have a few pros and cons of their own to add to the list.

Part 2: Carving Aurora into wards.