

BROCK'S BANTER: Common Cents Revolutions

By Brock Weir

I grew up in the heyday of Mike Harris' so-called Common Sense revolution. If the adage of "no pain, no gain" holds true, I'd like to say some of this alleged "common sense" rubbed off on my generation, but let's be real: that particularly Ontarian phenomenon did little.

That is, if there is no common sense to go around in the first place, it is difficult to sow the seeds of any form of lasting wisdom. I came from the seeds sown in mid to late 1984, and I think I have the authority to say on behalf of 1985 babies province-wide that rather than "no pain, no gain", a more apt cliché to trot out is "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

For reasons known only to the then-Premier and his revolving door of Ministers of Education, we 1985 kids had the misfortune of being the guinea pigs of every lame, crackpot apparently-revolutionary idea that happened to come to mind as far as our academic future was concerned.

Initially graded on a relatively straightforward system of numbers between 1 and 4, with a four being the pinnacle of achievement, this was tossed aside for a comprehensive letter system of A - F. This, in turn, was quickly binned in favour of a revolutionary system called "outcome based learning" (OBL) in which any tangible benefits were thrown out the window in favour of a new system where the worst you could get was a "needs improvement" if you failed or a "not applicable" if you didn't bother to do the assignment at all. In hindsight, I can only assume this was to cushion the blow of failure for the more delicate flowers in the 1985 garden, and the occasional over sensitive parental gardener.

Speaking of which, another revolutionary component to this OBL program was for students to partially relieve teachers themselves of the apparently strenuous burden of leading parent conferences by having us call our parents in so we could conduct a stimulating tour of our OBL binders to point out our own strengths and shortcomings.

When the folly of this venture was clear, the Common Sense Revolution had even less intuitive solutions in store for us before we went back to the tried and true number- and letter-grade systems.

In short, as the system rapidly changed, we students rarely knew where we stood and what was expected of us. Teachers too were suffering under this as well, unsure what was expected of them as well as the objectives of what they were to impart to us. Going back to the traditional way of doing things provided some stability and a much needed reality check and we were the better for it. Many years later, it was disconcerting to learn last week that this uncertainty as far as learning and education is concerned is a part of everyday operations at Town Hall.

At last Tuesday's Council meeting, several Councillors took a second stab at getting information they have been looking for since early March, namely just how much the Town of Aurora is spending on training, education and developing their full-time and part-time staff and, if they needed to halve this budget for 2015 alone, the impact it would have on the Town.

The first time they requested this information, a report was received with the view of Town Staff that reducing or cutting this portion of the budget would have a ?significant? impact on the Town, but did not particularly elaborate on what these impacts would be.

Would snow plows stop running if the managers overseeing this service weren't completely up-to-date on the latest iPhone operating system or new tweaks to Microsoft office? Would the onward march of subdivisions and commercial developments grind to a halt if the individuals behind progress had to skip a year of conferencing with their colleagues and comparing notes on best practices and sharing ideas on how to make their apartments more efficient in the months and years ahead?

They might, they might not, and I am certainly not discounting the value of keeping up-to-date with one's skills and keeping ahead of the curve (after all, it is what keeps places like Aurora competitive), but the distressing part is it doesn't seem that they, or we as taxpayers, know for sure.

It emerged Tuesday's discussions that this information simply isn't tracked. Municipal employees fill out forms to apply for funding to attend conferences and training sessions, applications which are reviewed and okayed by the relevant departments, but beyond that, it emerged these yellow sheets eventually find themselves in the wild, blue yonder with no clear answers on just where they end up.

According to the Town Treasurer, compiling the information on how much money was spent for training and development, and just what kind of training and development this money was going towards, would take ?months?, possibly delaying bringing the Aurora's 2015 Budget in for a proper landing if Council wanted to wait for it before rendering their final decision.

The apparent fact it would take ?months? to compile this information should be a cause for concern. Had staff begun to gather this information, as requested, the first time around they would have already been a month ahead of the game, but the larger question

remains: why?

Why isn't this information readily available with a push of a button? A simple excel spread sheet tracking who went where, how much it cost, and a brief description of why the session in question was of value to the Corporation of the Town of Aurora and, in turn, the people paying for it, would not only save a lot of time, but be a good development exercise in common sense.

Having this information readily available to the individuals who are, at the end of the day, the final word on how taxpayers' dollars are going to be spent, is not sticking their fingers where they don't belong, but what they were ultimately tasked by voters to do: represent them and their interests on the issues that matter the most. Discerning the importance of those issues, on the other hand, is impossible without the relevant information at their fingertips.

In fact, if we could master this art in Grade 6 through the curation of our binders, it should be a breeze.