

POLITICS AS USUAL: Mea Culpa

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

There have been many media pundits as of late and a seemingly equal number in the chattering classes in loud lament concerning the lack of interest in municipal politics ? as evidenced by the low voter turnout in election after election.

Worse still is the relative dearth of candidates willing to stand for office ? any office. And let's not even go near the topic of gender and minority representation in those seeking office. Fat chance of that!

Many have banged the drum loudly that we need more people, from all walks of life, to run for office, to shake things up, to foster the real change that can only come from within. I am sure you have heard enough of that blather to get the picture.

However, how is one to promote civic engagement and civic service as represented by public office when the only examples we have are our local Municipal governments?

If local politics is the yardstick by which we measure effective governance, then I fear we are watching our collective elected body engage in a mad scramble of a limbo dance under an ever lowering pole.

Before I get emails accusing me of ?picking? on this Council, let me say that Aurora's Council is no worse than some of the others, and certainly better than many. At least we can take solace in the fact that ?someone? in our Town Hall has not hired plainclothes policemen to sit in the audience of a council meeting, to lay in wait for a resident to ?get out of line? while watching said meeting and then have them arrested for overly exuberant clapping. Thank heavens for small mercies, eh?

That's a pretty low bar by anyone's estimation. But back to our fair Town.

At the close of the three plus hours of my life that I spent watching what passed for informed discourse, I thought to myself, ?No person in their right mind would willingly subject themselves to the torture that is a municipal Council meeting??

Yes, it was that bad.

Why, you might ask? Because of the inanity of it all. Despite the importance of their role, despite the importance of the decisions they make, Council debates frequently devolve into petty squabbles or excruciating dissections of the minutiae of council matters ? and last week's was a typical example.

Consider this: Council spent upwards of nearly an hour ?debating? whether sports representatives should be on a Cultural ad hoc committee. Then why, if ?sport? was to be included, why wasn't soccer, or hockey? Why aren't religious groups included? Which religious groups? And on and on and on it went!

Haggling over the composition of an Adhoc committee for anything more than five minutes is just ridiculous. Is the scope of their work appropriate? Check. Is there adequate opportunity for broad public input? Check. Will Council be the ultimate arbiter of how to move forward? Check! Then move on!

By 9.30 they had only dealt with three agenda items. One would think that there were better things to do, better things to discuss than committee composition. Decisions are made at glacial speed.

It takes all one's self control not to shout out, ?for the love of Pete, hurry up and decide something!?

But what's that expression, careful what you wish for? Sometimes they make rather quick decisions that simply boggle the mind ? as was the case with the big-ticket Diamond Jubilee Park. A \$180 thousand dollar plus expenditure all in a matter of minutes.

There's no rhyme or reason to the decision-making. No consistency of process. What is consistent? Inordinate amount of time is spent in debate that is dominated by hyperbole and histrionics rather than substance.

As a result, Council meetings are most often a head-scratching, hair-pulling, red-hot-poker to the eye agony of an experience the magnitude of which one cannot fully understand until one is sitting at that table.

And frankly, then it's too late. (Unless you are Holyday, then you can jump ship and run for a different office?but I digress).

After watching ? or enduring? ? last week's Council meeting, I offer my most sincerest apologies to those folks who were/are considering a run for office due to my encouragements (or admonishments, take your pick). I offer a heartfelt mea culpa.

By all means, please run for Council. But when you're sitting at that table with a bald patch on your head from all the hair you've pulled out, don't say I didn't warn you.

Until next week, stay informed, stay involved because this is, after all, Our Town.