

BROCK'S BANTER: Aurora Horror Story

By Brock Weir

Stockholm Syndrome once seemed to me, as a concept, as foreign as Sweden itself, with my own personal experience being confined to desperately needing grog after being stuck in the maze that is IKEA.

The syndrome itself is often described as hostages crossing that all-important threshold of developing sympathy ? or even empathy pangs ? with the people holding them against their will. Defined in the mid-1970s, symptoms also included identifying and bonding with one's captors.

While I was once mugged in a Paris Metro Station near the Eiffel Tower, an incident in which the perpetrator got away with little more than a moisture-damaged wristwatch and a pair of Air Canada earphones, I am thankful I have never actually been held hostage in the strictest sense of the word.

Cast your minds back, however, to the late fall and early winter of 2013. During a long stretch of relatively dreary weather, members of various local media outlets, current and former politicians, and insatiable municipal political junkies assembled at Newmarket Courthouse to hear opening arguments in the lawsuit brought forward by then-councillor Evelyn Buck against former mayor Phyllis Morris and a handful of incumbent and former members of Council.

The plaintiff and all defendants were present and accounted for, as was a judge to preside over the matter, and a jury of six men and women tasked with determining the ultimate outcome of the case.

At the time, we were promised a two-week trial. That was a laugh. After the first two weeks, everybody in that courtroom almost seemed like a bickering family unit.

One noticed if one of the regulars wasn't in attendance, one could tell if one of the jurors seemed a bit under the weather and, truth be told, although one didn't have a particular dog in the fight, it was alarming how invested one began to feel in its outcome. Any outcome.

At the end of week five, a misstep led to the dismissal of the jury, leaving the fate of the trial in the hands of the judge himself, a fate which still has yet to be determined.

The feeling in that Newmarket courtroom was very similar to ones felt in the previous two years, not just in that courthouse, but courtrooms on University Avenue in Toronto as well.

I'm sure many of us remember all too well the lawsuit launched by Ms. Morris against three local bloggers after a particularly controversial closed session meeting in September 2010. Regardless of what happened behind closed doors, what followed was months upon months of legal wrangling, multiple lawsuits, a revolving cast of central players (many of whom played key parts in the Buck saga), and high emotion on all sides on stages traversing a swath of Southern Ontario from Newmarket to Kitchener. Throughout that ordeal ? and I use that word from a position of only being able to imagine what those directly involved in the lawsuit were going through ? the seasons changed, Aurora Council changed hands, and more pressing issues came to the fore. Heck, I even spent one day in that University Avenue courtroom while my grandmother was on her deathbed as she prepared to sign off for a final time a couple of days later.

So, needless to say, I once again felt a vested interest in sticking it out until a final outcome was reached.

That, of course, was my job. For the people involved in the case, it was (and is) something they likely would never experience again. This week, Council had the chance to ensure or, at the very least, significantly reduce the chances that this would have happened again, by providing audio recordings of closed session meetings.

Opponents of the idea said such a move would increase risk to the Town by having closed session discussions out in public, and could open up the Town for further costly litigation without proper legislative backing from the Province of Ontario governing just how these audio records could and should be maintained and protected. Not only that, it would be a time consuming endeavour to have the Town Clerk go through each second of the audio recordings to determine what could and could not be released and how information ultimately making the public could be subsequently disseminated.

Proponents, on the other hand, weren't on board with these arguments, stating that the pros far outweighed the cons.

Councillor Thompson, for instance, said other municipalities, including Oshawa, have put these processes in place, with little trouble, and Aurora could help lead the ?vanguard? towards change. Not having these records on what happened leading up to that initial lawsuit, he argued, ultimately put the Town at risk and caused damage, a view shared by Councillors Gaertner and Humfries. ?At that point I hadn't experienced what I consider to be the horror story of 2010 and 2011 and all of the hardship it caused, including financial, for the Town? said Councillor Gaertner, who participated in the now infamous closed session meeting. ?I would

like to be part of the change in having these meetings recorded.?

Added Councillor Humfries: ?The first two or three years [of the last Council term] was a nightmare. There was information that was not clear and there was lots of ongoing speculation and tons of money, staff time, legal fees because things weren't clear.?

Having covered as much of the proceedings that followed that September 10 as time and practicality allowed and, in turn, talking with just about every person involved in the matter at all sides, ?horror story? and ?nightmare? are two terms that are particularly appropriate to describe the situation.

And these nightmares were not confined to Town Hall. Anyone with memories of the 2010 Municipal Election, as well as the year that followed, will recall the fractures, division and hostility these waves caused throughout Aurora.

This should never happen again.

Although members of Council, for various reasons, voted against reducing the risk of this ever happening again by simply flipping a switch, instead voting to implore the Province to put forward legislation to help create a climate that would make them less clammy before deciding to go for the gusto, let's hope this legislative framework is eventually put in place and those voting against the motion on Monday make good on their word to revisit the situation before something spurs Aurora Horror Story: Asylum.