

BROCK'S BANTER: Curated Cone of Silence

By Brock Weir

Sometimes people forget the value of standing on the sidelines and taking in an entire scene for what it is worth ? but it is not exactly a dying art.

These days, people often find a similar path watching reality TV ? or a program purporting to be a semblance of someone's reality, albeit altered and doctored to suit the fickle tastes of viewers. Others, such as men in the lead up to, or immediate aftermath of, Valentine's Day, can do this sitting on mall benches, or huddled, head in hand, in a quiet corner just ?people-watching? as their significant other shops for anything under the sun.

Often ? and personally, in the last few weeks ? this observation can lead to something unexpected, such as seeing both the joy and worry etched on the faces of local kids doing their damndest to make a difference in the lives of one of their friends who is going through a terrible ordeal; or subtle hand gestures shedding light on an unexpected human connection; or, to go to a wholly less poignant angle, the faces, theatrics, and intricate hand signals both in the stands and at the table in the Council Chamber.

When I walked into Hillary House on Thursday night, there was a bit of a charge in the air. Previous Annual General Meetings of the Aurora Historical Society have been held in the markedly more sterile atmospheres of Theatre Aurora and the Aurora branch of the Royal Canadian Legion (no slight against any of these very worthy venues, but everything is relative!), so one could expect a change of pace.

Given discussions that had transpired in this community over heritage parks, wrongdoing, and other slights, real and imagined, one could expect there to be a certain energy in a building at the epicentre of the issue. It was not disappointing. After a quick survey of those assembled in the room, where they were sitting, and the interesting body language ? many an eyebrow was sitting higher than normal with some of the regulars ? it was clear it was time to swing into observational mode.

Things were humming along at a good clip. There was nothing quite out of the ordinary about the proceedings, aside from a slight sense of reflectiveness with some as Suzanne Reiner gave her final speech as AHS president. She outlined the past of the AHS and the present of the Aurora Historical Society after the last year or so.

When she moved onto the future, however, the dynamic in the room had changed. People who had otherwise sat calmly in the room were now perched significantly more forward in their seats. At least two of the not-exactly-overflowing crowd had come to air their grievances and did so with gusto.

With Council the previous week threatening to cut off their funding all together next year in the absence of a good business plan to, well, to put it bluntly, get out of the hole, some questioned whether it is time for the AHS board to look less towards new and grandiose fundraising and curatorial events and more towards an ?exit strategy.?

It was a comment that burred throughout the room, and found a not-unsympathetic ear in its outgoing president. Debate came fast and furious, and as far as debates go, it was, in my mind, a healthy one. That is, until one lone voice called out from the back of a room with a calm, quiet, but unusually resounding ?STOP!?

Taken aback, the outgoing president complied and steered in a different direction. Nevertheless, the membership was persistent and the debate sooner rather than later found itself back on the original before this same voice ? now migrated to the front of the room said it was now time to ?move on?, before taking the opportunity to rebut most of what was said.

It was an undeniably negative conversation, but one, particularly given the last two or three weeks of debate at Council, the wider public, and even the blogosphere, was a conversation that needed to be had.

MISSED IT BY THAT MUCH!

With both commands, it was almost as if CONTROL's Cone of Silence was presumably dusted off from the inner bowels of the Hillary Connection, and descended on the room.

Within the Cone of Silence, however, I heard from proponents that perhaps things had not been communicated as well as they should have been with the AHS members. Perhaps communication wasn't all it could have been with the general public. Still, we heard, Council essentially made a bone-headed decision in delaying things for 90 days.

Those are my own words, but that was the general drift of the conversation.

In the delay itself, I am not sure that was an altogether bad idea, despite what I heard on Thursday.

Just a couple of days previously we heard from several Councillors worried that any of the three properties in question could be snapped up quicker than Mary Poppins cleaning up a nursery, despite one property sitting vacant for the better part of a

decade-and-a-half, and the other property being owned by the incoming president of the AHS itself. Selling off one's property to development wolves would hardly be the first act of good will for any leader.

Nevertheless, Council presses ahead with continuing an apparent series of conversations that had been held with potential private sector interests with an eye of making this heritage destination happen. Obviously that is a step in the right direction, but there is an equally correct fork in this conversational road.

No matter the interest in the private sector, there is still going to have to be some degree of partnership with the public at large, no matter how minute, and this is a very important conversation which still needs to be had.

Aside from less than a handful of delegates to the podium, a booth set up during three or four days of the 2013 Farmers' Market Season and a table at the entrance of ACC2 during the 2013 Home Show, consultation with the public has been minimal at best.

It is obviously important to keep most real estate transactions, even hypotheticals, in closed doors but this is an extraordinary case. If \$70,000 of taxpayers' dollars are going into keeping Hillary House, the cornerstone of this Heritage plan, operational, the public at large has a vested interest in knowing the potential costs of this entire transaction.

It is not simply a matter of three privately held lands potentially coming into the municipal portfolio. Aurora crossed that bridge with Hillary House many moons ago.

By this Thursday, we still have 80 days left in Council's self-imposed 90 day window. Let's remove the Cone of Silence and have a wide-ranging public debate to see what residents actually want to see happen with this three-house ?gem.?

Personally, I think it has the potential to be the ?gem? its proponents say it has the potential to be. But no gems can truly shine in a tarnished setting.

CORRECTION

Last week in my column, I misidentified the name of sci-fi writer Derwin Mak. My apologies to Mr. Mak and sci-fi fans everywhere!