

BROCK'S BANTER: Taking it to the People

By Brock Weir

After an enticing early arrival and a disappointing snatch-back from Mother Nature, it seems spring has finally truly arrived. This past weekend, families turned out in droves to bask in the sunlight, go for a jog, overhaul their gardens and, importantly for the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, head over to the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex (SARC) for the annual Aurora Chamber Home Show.

When the sun's a-blazing, it is always a crap shoot to see, as Scott Johnston notes in his column this week, whether this will help or hinder the Chamber showcase the very best of local business.

Are they going to be clamoring for new ideas on how to spruce up their yards, or will they be too busy enjoying them to think about that until the clouds moved in?

Whether it was because of or in spite of the weather, there were healthy crowds both times I dipped into the action at the SARC. On each occasion, there were many familiar faces to say hello to but, thankfully, a bevy of new faces as well.

Such is the nature of having events in the eastern half of Aurora.

A community that otherwise seems relatively disengaged from what has become seen as 'Old Aurora' becomes a destination.

Forget singles, this is a community mixer.

And this is hardly a revelation.

One only had to look back to September of 2013 when the community gathered at Ada Johnson Park for a multicultural celebration, the fourth and final component of Aurora's program celebrating the Town's Sesquicentennial.

Well, a chunk of the community gathered there anyway as the skies opened up and made portions of the event almost a total wash-out, but the crowd was healthy despite the weather and the success was evident to all who took part - so much so that Councillor Harold Kim made a motion last year to turn this multicultural event into a regular Aurora affair.

'You have a demarcation in Town and that is not desirable,' said Councillor Kim at the time.

Added Councillor Thompson: 'It was a great attempt to bridge the different cultures that are over on the eastern side of Aurora. Had it not been for the weather, I am sure it would have been a well-attended festival. I have always been supportive of trying to bring that back. I would encourage [staff] to look at what they did then to incorporate some of those aspects into what has been addressed here. I think that is long-overdue.'

So, after a long gestation period, it seemed as though we were getting a multicultural festival tacked onto the annual pre-Canada Day Dance in the Park - Town Park, that is - on June 30. However, that is now in doubt, and Dance in the Park Celebrates Cultural Diversity might be the Town's shortest-lived music festival yet, and there are so many contenders for that title.

Whether or not the event actually takes place as presented to Council last week, its proposal underscores a problematic loop in which Aurora seems perpetually stuck.

Municipal events hosted in Town Park are usually very well attended, but if you ask anyone who has attended more than a handful you're very likely to hear that each event is brimming with familiar faces, and not necessarily reflective of the multicultural melting pot Aurora is increasingly becoming.

Therefore, to my mind, it makes no sense to have a multicultural festival in a location that, while steeped with history and ambiance, is a place not seen as a destination to the very segments of this community to which the event is targeted; a way to entice the disconnected to become more engaged, active citizens in the whole of Aurora.

It is not a matter of whether or not the Hoedown Tent is available to host a venue, whether it is too big for a first-time event, or whether the Hoedown Tent will be available to future festivals once they pack up and move to King Township.

It is a matter of bringing the event to the people in eastern Aurora, engaging with them, and showing that their neighbourhoods are just as important artistically and culturally as more established parts of town.

For far too long there has been an emphasis on how to draw people from the east into the west and all the lovely events that happen at Town Park, whether it is Concerts in the Park, the Aurora Farmers' Market, summer music festivals, Theatre in the Park, volunteer appreciation days for various community organizations or, upcoming, the location of a community barbeque to celebrate all those taking part in the Aurora Cleanup Day.

Town Park is not the only game in Town. There numerous numerous parks in 'new' Aurora, such as Ada Johnson Park, Hickson Park and, yes, even Mavrincac Park (come what may) just waiting to come into their own. Movies in the Park is the only Town event giving these venues a fighting chance of showing off their full potential.

Aurora has a romanticized ideal of Yonge and Wellington being the Town's Downtown Core, and, once-upon-a-time, that was indeed the case.

But now, as the community has grown, the reality is much different.

The Downtown Core has shifted eastward to the Bayview corridor and there is very little anyone can do about it.

'The idea was if you can't bring Mohammed to the mountain, bring the mountain to Mohammed,' said Councillor Abel at last week's Council meeting.

Added Mayor Dawe: 'I think the wonderful thing I have always expressed is a desire to make sure we do bring people to old Aurora and, at the same time, I think we need to bring people from the west side of Town to the east side of Town.'

Both gentlemen, in my opinion, are quite correct. The need is indeed there.

The mountain of this festival might be eroding into a molehill right before our eyes, but if something does get salvaged, the location seems set in stone and that is unfortunate.

For decades, the Dance in the Park has been an Aurora staple, largely attracting people who have become Aurora staples, to get their groove on, dance the night away and consume a few cans and bottles of Canada's staples.

From what I have experienced at the two or three dances I have stopped into, it is not necessarily an event conducive to family revelry and it is not particularly conducive to getting revellers to hit pause on the party to take in the martial arts bouts, beautiful depictions of Asian music and dance, and the mesmerizing energy of Balkan dancers that made the Sesquicentennial event so memorable.

'Piggybacking' onto an event that already runs like a well-oiled machine and shoehorning an event like this into a location that is familiar enough to event planners to be almost foolproof might seem like the easiest, smoothest (if not slightly lazy) way to go, but it leaves the people it was intended to entice as decisively disengaged as they are now.

Aurora's east and west deserve better? and have demonstrated they are just waiting for it.