

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Culture in Aurora & Ontario

Enjoying our culture in Aurora and Ontario

By Chris Ballard, MPP

Newmarket-Aurora

It was Culture Days across much of Ontario and Canada this past weekend. In our community, there was plenty of free culture to indulge in, from book signings to soup making to enjoying Persian music.

In fact, in Ontario there were some 1,671 community-based cultural events. At least nine of those took place in Aurora and another 31 in nearby communities.

Clearly, there was lots of free culture to enjoy between Friday night and Sunday.

I started the day with a cooking display by Chef Nick of The Family Kitchen at the Aurora Farmers' Market & Artisan Fair. I ended it by meeting Aurora resident and author, Marina Nemat, at the Aurora Public Library as she discussed her award-winning memoir, *Prisoner of Tehran*

Founded in 2009, Culture Days is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to building a national network of cultural connections devoted to providing Canadians with opportunities to participate in, and appreciate, all forms of arts and culture, the organization says.

As a youngster, my contribution to culture in Aurora was performing in musicals (singing: very good; acting: not very good.). They were directed by noted local director Cy Buck, and others. As a youngster, I got a front-row seat to witness how cultural activities bring a community together.

As Chair of Aurora's Economic Development Advisory Committee, I promoted the creation of the Aurora Cultural Centre as a way of driving the development of a creative economy in our town.

A thriving local cultural industry is good not just because it makes a town a more vibrant and interesting place to live and do business in, but also because a thriving cultural scene is good for the economy.

Todd Hirsch, Chief Economist at ATB Financial in Calgary, and author of *The Boiling Frog Dilemma: Saving Canada from Economic Decline*, writes in *The Globe and Mail* that investing in culture is an economic imperative.

He cites what other deep thinkers on the topic of culture and the economy have said: that investment in culture can mitigate the ups and downs of other industries because diversity is healthy for any economy; and that it helps attract and retain workers.

But, he adds a third reason which he believes the most important: To become the creative, innovative and imaginative citizens that our companies and governments want us to be, Canadians need to willingly expose themselves to new ideas.

A vibrant arts and culture community, he argues, is the easiest way to make this happen.

American neuroscientist Gregory Berns writes in his book *Iconoclast* To see things differently than other people, the most effective solution is to bombard the brain with things it has never encountered before.

Mr. Hirsch says Arts and culture offer us the chance to bombard our brain with new stimulus.

Our economy is only as good as our last creative idea. Mr. Hirsch says if we want to be a country of innovators looking for new products, discovering environmentally responsible ways to extract resources, finding efficiencies in manufacturing? we need to be creative.

He urges us to think about culture not as a nice-to-have, but as important as well-maintained roads and bridges.

But giving us the chance to stimulate our minds with new ideas and experiences, they give us the opportunity to become more creative. Arts and culture are infrastructure for the mind, he writes.

I couldn't have put it better.

The importance of creativity in the workplace was driven home to me again this past Saturday as I toured an automobile parts manufacturer in the riding. The president spoke of how they export their parts to China. You read that right? we are exporting manufactured product to China.

Even with the economic differences between Canada and China, the president told us the creativity and innovative abilities of our workers, together with their dedication, makes the firm competitive in the world market.

I am heartened to read in Premier Kathleen Wynne's mandate letter to Minister Coteau released last week, that promoting culture remains foremost a priority for 2014. In the letter the Premier asks Coteau, Minister of Tourism, Culture and Sport, to continue to support cultural agencies and to maximize their economic and social contributions to the province.

Premier Wynne asked the Minister to continue to work with stakeholders to build on the entertainment and creative cluster strategy

and develop an arts policy framework.

?The framework should help maximize the economic benefits of arts and culture to individuals and communities,? the Premier writes.

As for the innovative women and men I met at the auto parts company Saturday, I'd like to think they are so creative because they witnessed my contribution to local culture through my performance in *The Music Man*. I doubt it, however ? most hadn't been born when I was on stage.

Contact MPP Chris Ballard at his Community Office: 905-750-0019, or by email: cballard.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org. Chris' office is located in Suite 201, 14845 Yonge St., Aurora. Office hours are 9 a.m. ? 4.30 p.m., Monday to Friday.