

A reality check within a body check?

My first experience in a traditional publicly-funded school came in Grade One.

Living in what was then a rural part of Newmarket, a section that is now anything but, I got a bit of a head-start at an area Montessori school.

At the time of my enrollment, the school convened in the basement of a nearby church where, looking back, all I remember is a sea of heavily upholstered brown everything. Everywhere. The walls, the carpets, everything with a tasteful splash of orange here and there. Hey, it was a product of its time.

The school outgrew the space soon after I started and, from the church basement, we decamped to a very modern new location in a commercial unit inside a burgeoning business park that is now a hive of industry.

Consisting of three classrooms, a lunch area, an administrative office and not much else, it was bright and cheerful by comparison, although the wall-to-wall asphalt of the playground, surrounded on three sides by a busy parking lot with only a chain-link fence between us and the hustle and bustle of commerce left something to be desired.

That took care of Junior and Senior Kindergarten, but by the time Grade One rolled around I was ready for the big leagues. The following September, I grabbed my lunchbox and stood at the end of the driveway to catch the bus for my first day at a Kindergarten ? Grade 8 elementary school.

I remember being a bundle of nerves as I waited for this next chapter of my life to begin. I was excited at the idea, but even at that age more than a little trepidatious about leaving the cozy school environment I had come to love for something decidedly larger.

And with good reason. I got off the bus and stepped into a sweeping, grassy vista of a school yard and, a short jog away, entered a mid-century building with spacious classrooms with their own cloakrooms, some with their own courtyards, cavernous hallways, bathrooms not much smaller than the classrooms, and a library which was the stuff of dreams.

I was only at the school for two years before boundaries were redrawn due to Newmarket's fast growth, but it left a lasting impression. I felt like I hit the big time.

A funny aspect of this job is some of the places it takes you.

My first elementary school just happened to be kitty-corner to a Legion branch and, as luck would have it, an event I had to cover took me back to the ol' stomping grounds. Arriving at the Legion with about 45 minutes to spare, and just as school was letting out for the day, I headed across the street for a trip down memory lane.

This particular trip, however, presented a not altogether familiar road.

As soon as I walked through the door and checked in, I tried to retrace my steps as much as I could that formative first day. This time things felt decidedly different. Having experienced two further elementary schools, a hulking mass of a high school, and a sprawling university campus, all of a sudden that school yard was less sweeping, the classrooms more pokey, the bathrooms more utilitarian than luxurious, the courtyard not as it appeared in my mind's eye, and the library, although still spacious, not quite as jam-packed with volumes as I'd recalled.

Municipal growth took me away from the school as new places of education were built to account for large and steady influxes of new students, and these buildings, as they should be, were modern, large, and reflective of the communities in which they were built to serve.

The spacious school that I remembered, one built more than 30 years before I was born, was a product of its time and my memory of that product was a reflection of my own time there as seen through the eyes as a much smaller six-year-old. What I saw through refreshed eyes, with a different perspective, just a few years ago, was much different from the first time around and, for better or worse, a reflection of the present reality.

It was impossible to ever put on those rose-coloured glasses again, but I was still glad of the reality check.

Whether we like it or not, municipal growth in the coming years will require us to take stock and brace for another reality check.

Much ink has been spilled in recent weeks regarding the municipal body check that is the Ford Government's Bill 23, the More Homes Built Faster Act, 2022. In short, as it has been covered extensively through these pages, concerns continue to rage over the scope of the Bill, its potential environmental impacts, the weakening of Conservation Authorities, and limits on Development Charges, which could result in a rise in property taxes in future years to account for infrastructure due to Provincial growth targets.

And yet, as much as those concerns are valid and will be born out as the meat is put on its legislative bones, I think there's one bright spot to be found amid the ongoing furore: that elusive and necessary reality check.

For far too long, our communities have been sold on their apparent (but intangible) "small town feel" compared to "well, that's never been really clear. To our bustling city neighbours? Toronto? A small mining community in Northern Ontario? To our past?"

Residents often say they moved to these parts from cities, yes, like Toronto, for its small-town "feel" or "charm" ? with these sentiments often expressed in the face of a large or multi-storey development proposal ? resulting in limited building heights and, in response, sprawl.

As opposition continues to mount over the Bill for myriad justifiable reasons, perhaps there is an opportunity to be found within the mess to have an extensive conversation about how our communities will develop, how high we can and should be allowed to build in order to address the housing crisis, and whether building up just might be preferable to losing important greenspaces in the name of sprawl.

And maybe, just maybe, an evaluation on opportunities that have been missed in a quest to maintain "small town feel" in a Town that is anything but.

As far as opportunities grow, this is one for a fresh perspective and creativity ? creativity which could prove defining for generations to come, but is reflective of the here, of the now, and of what is being tossed to us from Queen's Park.