

Bill Rea ? Another side of ?walkable? areas

Over the years, I have sat through more council and committee meetings than I would care to think about.

And since I have a brain in my head and I like to think I know how to use it, I think I would be foolish if I had not let some of what I heard influence me, at least to some extent.

Part of the problem in these meetings is much of the discussion is based on jargon. That's not surprising and certainly not meant to be critical. Municipal staffers and their political overseers have to do a lot of internal communication, so it stands to reason that they're going to toss around terms with which the average Joe on the street might not be familiar.

It happens, I guess, with people in many occupations, if not all of them.

My late mother was a bookkeeper, and spent the last couple of years of her working life as a payroll clerk in a chartered accountant's office. That had two impacts. It spurred her interest in economics and finances, and it made her completely incomprehensible when she started talking about economics and finances. Conversations on the topic would not get very far before she started using the words (meaning jargon) she had picked up at work.

My visits to my mother, especially after my father had died, usually included some discussion about her efforts to sort through the family finances. The financial situation of my family really wasn't too involved ? probably comparable to most other families. I think my mother tried to introduce a few wrinkles into things so she'd be able to devote much of her time to something she was rather passionate about.

I don't think all of us are prone to talk too much in our work-related jargon. I try to avoid it when I'm away from work, which I admit is seldom. I have always figured when I have down time, I want to get my mind as far away from work as possible. Thus I don't get very chatty in social situations when someone, usually courteously, asks me how work's going.

But when I'm on the job, that's where my mind is supposed to be (and it sometimes is). So I have little trouble with municipal officials being of the same mind. It does mean I have to translate some of this jargon into terms the majority of people can grasp, but I have little trouble with that. I believe the process is known as ?doing my job.?

And there have been times when some of the terms I heard a lot were just words to me. But there are cases when the more you hear of something, the more the concept starts to think in.

I have been hearing a lot lately terms like ?walkability? and ?pedestrian-friendly,? or ?cycling-friendly.? Needless to say, they have been coming up in meetings regarding planning issues, especially when it comes to proposals for new developments. They were prominent at last week's council workshop on the ideas for developing the second phase of Mayfield West.

As I listened to the discussions, I thought a lot of the neighbourhood in which I lived the first six years of my life, and after my family moved it was about a mile away for many years after that. I can't really comment if it was ?cycling friendly,? since I was still at the tricycle stage during the time we lived there. But it was walkable, pedestrian-friendly and there were lots of small businesses in the neighbourhood. When I was a little kid, one of my best friends was a member of the family that ran the local vegetable stand, and his oldest brother was the same age as my brother, so there was a lot of camaraderie to be had. And it was along one of the busiest streets in Toronto.

The area today is known as Bloor West Village. It's seldom that I'm able to get down there these days. But when I'm able, I try to get a bit of walking around in. Granted, nostalgia has a lot to do with it, as I stroll sidewalks that I once drove my tricycle along (it was after we had moved that I braved a two-wheeler). But it is also a community that can handle both cars and pedestrians.

Granted, the dynamics in effect in that part of the world were and are a lot different from what we have in Caledon. For one thing, there are subway stations at both ends of that stretch today, although they came after we had moved. In my time in that neighbourhood, it was streetcars. Although there has been a lot of talk in these parts about public transit, I have reconciled myself to the fact that I will not live to see a subway station in Bolton or Mayfield West (and I'm pretty sure no one wants one in Belfountain). In fact, it was the advent of that subway in the mid-60s that prompted my family to move. In addition to the subway, there was plenty of talk about high-rise apartment buildings in the area. That meant there was a lot of speculation, with land values getting a lot higher than they probably should have been. Eventually, some fellow offered my father a lot of money for the house (a lot more than it was worth, I was subsequently told), and since my dad did not have rocks in his head, he went for it. The money enabled him to acquire the type of house he probably had in mind to buy all along (I did know the man), but I guess he was able to do it several years ahead of schedule.

I'll never knock the house into which we moved. It was a nice house in quiet and upscale neighbourhood. It was on a cul-de-sac, meaning it was an ideal setting for street hockey (I was a pretty fair goalie in my day). And once the mortgage was paid off, the family's net worth (not to mention my inheritance) benefitted appreciably. But it was not a walkable neighbourhood. It was a good

mile to the nearest shopping area (namely Bloor Street). The route I had to take to walk to school was one I'm sure they don't let kids take today. It involved going down a ravine, across a creek, through what used to be a municipal garbage dump up a couple of hills and across a large soccer pitch and up another hill.

I have sometimes reflected that I might have been better off had that guy not offered my father that large sum of money for the old house. Another couple of years of growing up in that area might have offered me a certain street wisdom that I have always believed that I lacked.

There is nothing wrong with being street wise, and indeed; in my line of work, I have sometimes thought it would have been a big help to me. While I don't have children, I do understand the tendency, and even the need to shield them. But there is also a need to expose them to certain realities of life, if for no other reason than they are eventually going to have to face them anyway. I have often thought that was one part of my development that was allowed to slide more than it should have. There is a definite advantage to being within walking distance of as much of life as possible, and that includes business transactions, commerce, etc.

I know there are a lot of other factors involved in child development, but I can think of one that is sometimes downplayed more than it should be

