

Kicking the can solves little

by BROCK WEIR

I had a lot of time to think in the wee hours of Wednesday morning as I slowly made my way home. It was a workday that was nothing short of mammoth, clocking in mere minutes under 18 hours. Heading home at the end of the day is, of course, nothing new. What was new, however, was the destination.

Up until a few short weeks ago, I lived about 10 minutes or so from our Aurora office. Now, there's about an hour's commute separating the spheres of home and work and getting used to the change is still a work in progress.

We learned of our impending move in August of 2023 and, helpfully, we also knew what our window was to get out. February 2024, from the vantage point of August, seemed like a goodly amount of time to get things done. This breathing room was both a blessing and a curse because, with the berth was so wide, the urgency of the situation wasn't quite apparent. Things that should have been done along the way were left until time was nothing short of ?crunch.?

In many ways the stress I felt coming up to the end of January was my own doing and might be chalked up to my reluctance to confront the reality of the situation. I found I unconsciously kicked the can of confrontation a bit further down the road than I intended and it wound up kicking me in the butt.

As the dust now settles, boxes are still being unpacked and are finding their place, and the finding of the proverbial feet is now underway ? if not for that pesky commute.

Last Tuesday night, at 7 p.m., I covered a Public Planning meeting in Aurora, the length of which didn't dovetail into my travel plans. By the time lawmakers brought the session in for a landing by 1.30 a.m., I picked an Uber. The 30-minute-or-so trip in the back seat, largely with my own thoughts, offered a lot of time of reflection of what unfolded ? and the overriding feeling I had was gratitude in that, despite the stress of the last few months, we had places to land.

Sadly, the same can't be said by the men who, through little fault of their own, found themselves in the middle of political crosshairs as Aurora debated, and ultimately rejected a proposal from the Region of York to build emergency and transitional housing for men in its south end.

It was unfortunate to see some members of the community, for whom a residence such as this would benefit the most, painted with the broadest of brushes, touching upon just about every stereotype faced by unhoused individuals each and every day.

One of the most troubling brought out by far too many was the idea these men would only find a place within purely due to their own life choices, rather than considering circumstances beyond their control. This line of thought was only underscored by some who cited the proposed site's proximity to an LCBO as a problem.

But last week's arguments were, by and large, nothing new.

Some said transitional housing was too close to their neighbourhood; others argued it was too far from everything else, including the idea it was ?deep in the woods,? despite being just steps from Yonge Street. It was a small mercy property values were only dusted off a couple of times.

A different facet was the chance for area lawmakers to make their final pushes for or against the plan.

An overriding theme from lawmakers in the opposition camp was the suitability of the site. Some argued despite numerous examples of such a scenario becoming reality throughout the community, that building housing units for this beleaguered demographic so

close to a pumping station was unthinkable and inhumane.

It was too far from the vital resources residents' need to get back on their feet, they argued, despite the proposed location being no more than a two-to-three minute walk along Yonge to local places of employment and York Region Transit to take them to similar opportunities north or south of Aurora

The other predominant argument in Council Chambers was umbrage that despite the apparent 'urgency' to construct these housing units it took York Region more than a year to come back with an updated plan. This update, they argued, did not go far enough to address residents' concerns ' although, after hearing the arguments at the meeting, I don't think anything short of nixing the proposal altogether would have satisfied ' or propose alternative sites for the build within Aurora.

Per the input of Regional staff, only the site on the table last week and the site of a former hotel site, also in Aurora, with the latter option fizzling after the Region was outbid on property purchase, were considered. Yet as far as serious alternatives go, that's two more than what was offered by Council.

Council may have wanted more options presented from the Region, but, over those 12 months, they could have put their thinking caps on for alternative sites of their own. After all, the opposition professed to be more than willing to work with the Region for just such an alternative within our borders.

Alas, almost all suggestions on where a better fit might be found were absent ' with the exception of one suggestion of a Town-owned property on the southeast corner of Yonge and Mosley Streets. That is, of course, if the Region offered the Town their purchase price, leaving taxpayers to foot the bill for it twice.

Given the suggesting Councillor's position on Aurora's redevelopment of nearby Town Square, a project intended to revitalize the community's historic downtown core, I suspect this suggestion might have been slightly tongue-in-cheek, but I'd argue there is sound reasoning there.

For potential clients of the transitional and emergency housing shelter in Aurora's south end, this location would be even closer to employment opportunities, community resources found at the Aurora Public Library, already a vital municipal hub and lifeline for the precariously housed, all the wonderful programs and opportunities that will be available at Town Square, and will shave 60 or possibly even 90 seconds off the walk to transit.

Of course, should this ever come to pass there will be another round of concerns ' this time it would be too close to employment opportunities, too close to public parks and open spaces, too close to where youth congregate, or too-close-to-home for a problem which, until just a few years ago, has been almost invisible.

Despite the decision taken last week, it felt like it was just another chance to kick the proverbial can of necessity down the road, a move which will only exacerbate a growing and increasingly visible issue ' and keeping an eye on this provided valuable lessons for all our communities.