

Lofty reality checks

by BROCK WEIR

There are some lessons we learn very early on in our lives.

Sharing, for instance, is drummed into us almost as soon as we're old enough to sit upright and interact with others. Respect for one another quickly follows. Considering the viewpoints of others is another one that comes along in our formative years, but that's a lesson that stays with some of us longer than others.

We learn the basics of respect from (it is hoped) our parents, basics that are subsequently reinforced by teachers as we learn to navigate a world away from the comforts of our homes.

With these building blocks, we're able to forge ahead into the world ready to learn from the experiences, and, therefore, lessons we learn along the way.

Hopefully those early lessons 'took' because they come in handy the further along you get on the road.

As your Grade number gets higher and higher through elementary and secondary school, you're increasingly asked to call upon these lessons as teachers, instructors, and indeed parents, take more of a hands-off approach, letting you find your own way in learning the lessons that need to be learned - and it's here that character is really reinforced.

Some of these lessons are universal, some are unique to the individual, but one that is learned reasonably early in any facet of life is that it's impossible to please everybody.

Pleasing everybody all of the time is an admirable goal, but all too often it feels pretty futile. Sometimes, at the end of the day, you have to do what's right either for yourself or, if not for yourself, the greater good.

While we all understand this, sometimes it is hard to accept - and increasingly so.

I don't have to spill ink in this space to compile a laundry list of decisions that have been made for the 'greater good' in recent years that have spectacularly failed to please everybody. Indeed, in some of the examples that have come out of the half-decade or so, it almost appears that displeasing everyone equally can sometimes be a measure of success, as sorry as it sounds.

Yet, no matter how many times we learn this lesson, our innate desire to be people pleasers bubbles to the surface, regardless of age or circumstance.

We can experience it in the household where parents of multiple children try to solve the occasionally thankless question of, 'What can we do today that would be great for all the kiddos?' and we can see it in our public spheres as well. And all too often, in my view, this phenomenon can hamstring progress - 'progress' being, of course in the eye of the beholder - as leaders wait for something elusive to come along, a magic bullet that is beneficial and expeditious for everyone concerned.

From this seat, observing multiple municipal councils in multiple communities, multiple governments at both the Provincial and Federal level, and more, it's always a shame to see well-intentioned, positive projects get pushed to the backburner or tossed out altogether at the smallest hint of public backlash.

Much of this backlash - and, in the interests of full fairness, not all - can be attributed to another feeling that might also be innate: the desire to maintain the status quo. If it's not an effort to maintain the status quo, it can also be a drive to avoid the most minimal of pain (read: slight inconvenience) for the maximum gain.

But this effort to try to find projects and methods that do please everyone will need to be put on ice as our municipalities face challenges that are not of our communities' making and are, instead, problems that have been foisted upon us to solve.

With the Province putting its proverbial pedal to the metal in incentivising communities to meet rapidly accelerated housing targets, something will have to give.

Some communities have the space to accommodate the targets, still more do not.

It's going to require some out-of-the-box thinking in order to reach those goals.

Land is finite and, to my mind, avoiding building up will only last so long.

Communities like ours, as I have mentioned in this space before, have banked a lot on so-called 'small-town feel.'

Note the word 'feel' in that phrase - that's all it is: a feeling. The days of small-town life and living is a reality that has passed us by, alas. Trying to hold onto it, as much as we might like to, seems like trying to maintain a façade for something that no longer exists.

In order to meet these targets, height limits, such as they are, are going to have to be re-thought. It won't be beyond the realm of possibility that buildings of 15+ stories or more, in targeted and logical areas, will be the new normal and, despite the pain, aggravation and inconvenience it might cause, it will be a price we will all have to pay.

It's not an endorsement, mind you; it's simply what we're going to have to face.

That's a reality of the targets, but I fear they will do little to address the reality of the housing and affordability crises we're currently living with.

The solution on the table right now appears to be maintain the status quo, but at an accelerated rate. It's a matter of providing the opportunities for developers to do what they do best, but it's naturally a profit-driven business that rarely results in units that can be considered affordable by any definition.

In my view, governments at all levels need to take a more proactive and creative role in the creation and fostering of affordable units.

Leaders often like to say that governments - at least at the lower tiers - shouldn't be in the housing business, but getting into it would hardly be reinventing the wheel.

There are lessons to be rediscovered from postwar governments and those through the 1980s.

As the crisis continues, it will be less a matter of 'getting into the housing business' but one of providing infrastructure. It's an idea that won't please everyone, but one I feel will make us all better off in the long run.

And, at the end of the day, there might not be a choice.