

The price we pay to make good things happen

By Ben Bennett

This column began a rant against the cement heads but is ending up on a much more positive and hopeful note.

One of the great frustrations I have with local government is how limited its power really is. And it must be terribly frustrating for people who want to make good things happen in Guelph. They are stymied at every turn – sometimes by the powers-that be and sometime by the system itself. And the old cotton mill on Farquhar Street may well be a victim of that.

From where I sit, doing good things means looking after our community health and looking after our community fabric. And we certainly have challenges in both departments.

The plans for the central transit hub are a case in point. Through a number of different circumstances, the amazing opportunity has presented itself for Guelph to have the local buses, train, Greyhound and GO all converge in one place. This is very unusual nowadays and the fact that it can be done downtown is all the more convenient and efficient. Our current administration has seized this vision and it is going ahead, making the most of some serious upper-tier government dollars and other funding sources to offset the cost. There is no question that this is an example of making good things happen.

But there is a price to be paid.

Given the number of players and investment involved with the transit hub, those players want to be sure their plans can go ahead before committing. One of those players is GO Transit and these are the guys I was all set to throw rocks at.

The short version of a long story is that GO, which hasn't seen a train run in to Guelph since the last century, is planning to bring a commuter service back. It's a long-term plan but it could mean hourly trains to the big smoke (be still my beating heart!) and fewer and fewer excuses for driving there. I'd pretty well written off GO but I suppose the Places To Grow population boom we can expect will make it a viable proposition, especially when gas hits \$2 a litre.

GO always likes to have a kiss and ride passenger drop-off area right where the train comes in and it has purchased the two old buildings on the south side of the tracks opposite the train station. Both were on the heritage list, which could have been an impediment to GO's involvement in the project. It turns out that GO had already agree to preserve the old drill hall, which has major heritage credentials, and was looking to remove the old cotton mill, which has some bits worth saving and others that are not.

I was amazed that the folks from GO, who are usually more about paving paradise than preserving heritage, were already open to reuse of the drill hall and at least prepared to talk about whether any parts of the mill could be saved. To close the deal, however, they implied the mill being on the heritage list was a deal breaker and council agreed to remove it. Even if it stayed on the list there's no guarantee

it would be saved, and given that GOs plan are long term, there is still time to try to find ways to incorporate part of the building in the plans. So there is some hope but probably not much.

Having read the reports, what also surprised me was the extent of the effort made by the city and GO to see what could be done with the different parts of the cotton mill. This tells me that the system, at least locally, was doing what it should. At least we have the comfort of knowing that people did try. I think we are sometimes quick to assume they didn't.

Just imagine what could have happened if some of the attitudes we have seen around the horseshoe in the past had prevailed. That gorgeous old wall that gives our new city hall at least something to write home about would be gone, as would the convent on the hill. And the drill hall would be history.

(Ben Bennett is a member of the Guelph Mercury Community Editorial Board. His past columns can be found at www.bbc.guelph.org.)

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