

Over the Back Fence
For Friday April 11, 2008
Approx 635 words

Profiting from loss
By Alva Wood

The agenda for the last village council meeting called it a Proposal for Profit Centre.

When the proposal came up in the usual cycle of applications for re-zoning, setbacks, variances, renovations, sewer connections, salary adjustments, gravel pit operations, and grants to struggling artists, mayor Jake Bowers looks blank.

“What’s this about?” he asks administrator Henry Hill.

Henry grins wider than the Cheshire Cat.

“Air Canada,” he says.

“If it’s Air Canada, I don’t want to know about it,” says Deirdre Pollacks. She has had so many flight reservations cancelled, amended, or missed, that she refuses to fly Air Canada any more.

“You shouldn’t let your personal prejudices interfere with your business dealings,” Henry reminds her. “There’s a reason why Robert Milton keeps getting chosen as CEO of the year.”

Deirdre looks unconvinced.

Henry pulls out a newspaper, and reads an item buried in the back pages:

“Air Canada is offering a comprehensive travel assistance service for customers affected by flight delays or travel disruptions,” he reads.

“That’s almost everyone,” Deirdre interrupts.

Henry flows along like an oil slick on a stream: “A new service provides customers with telephone access to customer service agents who will provide help, if they, that is, the customers,” Henry explains, “have paid for the optional assistance service.”

“But we’re not in the travel business,” mayor Jake objects.

“Neither are Air Canada,” Deirdre snorts.

“There must be a point to all this,” suggests Rosie Green.

“There certainly is,” says Henry, not in the least abashed by all the criticism. “Air Canada has found a way to turn its inefficiencies into additional cash flow. If I may put this matter a trifle crudely, now you can pay a premium to have the people who screwed you unscrew you.”

“Wait a minute,” says Rosie, forehead furrowed as she thinks through the implications. “That means that if they operated efficiently, they’d put their own special service out of business, wouldn’t they?”

“Not much chance of that!” scoffs Deirdre.

“Precisely,” Henry agrees. “They have created an enviable situation where they control both demand and supply. The more they screw up people’s reservations, the more people will have to turn to them to get help with re-booking their flights, hotel reservations, car rentals... The possibilities are almost endless!”

“I get it,” says Dunc. “If the customer service fees slow down, they just pass the word to their attendants to bugger things up a bit better.”

Mayor Jake is trying to get his council meeting back on track. “So what’s this got to do with us?” he asks.

“Think about it,” says Henry, as if to a child. “After Air Canada, who else do people get really pissed off with?”

It’s a rhetorical question, so he answers it himself. “Municipal governments, of course,” he chortles. “If it has anything to do with business licences, building permits, zoning variances, road closures, community grants, it doesn’t matter what we do, people are never satisfied. We take too long to process their applications. We don’t consider all the factors. We charge too much. We don’t consult widely enough. We can’t make up our minds....”

“Hey,” he says, happily, “there’s absolutely no limit to the number of ways that our taxpayers can find fault with us.”

“So,” he says, “why not turn that to our benefit? Just like Air Canada, we can offer a premium package along with their tax notices. If they’re not satisfied, for an additional fee, we can put them in touch with someone who’ll help them sort it all out.”

“And who would that be?” asks a sceptical Deirdre.

“Does this mean hiring a bunch of extra staff?” Dunc demands.

“Of course not,” Henry reassures them. “The people best qualified to unscramble the situation are the same people who scrambled it in the first place. It’s perfect!”