

Over the Back Fence  
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Approx 640 words

You can't stop progress  
By Alva Wood

It was a stormy council meeting last week.

Administrator Henry Hill had promised councillors that he would present his staff's recommendations for redevelopment of the village downtown area.

For the last two years, he has been conducting survey after survey to find out what the residents want. Apparently none of the surveys has come back with what he wants.

Village residents hold dramatically different opinions on issues like abortion, assisted suicide, safe injection sites, and whether pigs have wings. But they show remarkable unanimity about development. They don't want it.

There's no disagreement about how much. Only about how little.

Some want nothing more than what we already have. Others would welcome a few extra services, like a grocery store or a Tim Horton's. But nobody wants a Home Depot, Ikea, or Wal-Mart.

Hector Wentz expressed the majority view. "We came here because we like a rural lifestyle," he wrote on his survey form. "If I wanted to live in Cleveland-by-the-Creek, I'd move to Richmond."

"No chain stores," wrote Tessa Vanderkam. "Not even a Dairy Queen."

So the public gallery was full for this occasion.

Freddie Fallis tried to launch a slide presentation. When he couldn't get his video projector to work, Henry had to take over. Whenever Henry needed a point illustrated, Freddie held up the laptop computer so everyone could squint at its tiny glowing screen.

Henry outlined grandiose plans for the downtown. Several pioneer homes would be bulldozed, to clear space for three floors of a parking garage. There'd be a pedestrian overpass into a double-decker shopping mall, anchored by big-box stores at each end. There'd be traffic lights at both ends, with a landscaped roundabout at the entry to the mall and parkade. With the whole thing lit up right through the night by high-intensity sodium-vapor streetlights to prevent crime.

That's as far as he got.

The public gallery erupted in protest. They stormed the microphones. Or rather, they ignored the microphones completely and started shouting.

"What was the point of all those goddam surveys if you're not going to pay attention to them?" yelled Terry Brown.

"You haven't heard a thing we said!" screamed Tessa.

"What happened to dark skies, speed bumps, and parking restrictions?" demanded Aynsley Kastor.

Mayor Jake Bowers pounded his gavel and shouted, "Order! Order!" They paid no attention. They started chanting, "No! No! No! No!..."

But eventually things calmed down again. The mayor ruled that public would have ample opportunity to comment at the conclusion of the presentation, following discussion by councillors, provided there was time, unless the coffee ran out, and he hoped it was Fair Trade coffee, because Ethiopian farmers were, umm, what was he trying to say anyway...

The councillors weren't any easier on Henry.

"You're employed by the citizens of this community," Deirdre Pollacks lectured him. "You should be following their wishes instead of imposing your own ideas."

Rosie Green set aside her usual gentle manner. "I get the impression," she snapped, "that you made up your mind long ago and don't care what we think."

"What part of 'No' can't you spell?" asked Dunc McMahon.

As mayor, Jake tried to stay impartial. But after the sound and fury had faded away, he stopped Henry in the hall. "How could you come up with a plan so different from what people said they wanted?" he asked.

"That's easy," Henry explained. "The people don't know what they want," he said. "They get onto NIMBY bandwagons. They're opposed to everything. Especially progress," he said, warming to his subject.

“The fact is, they don’t have all the facts,” he continued. “They think they can stop progress, but they can’t. Of course it’s good public relations to consult voters, but policy should deal with the real world and not be based on pooled ignorance.”

Jake just shook his head and went home.