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The glass half-full

It is so easy to fall into the “glass half-empty” state of mind. We’re all guilty of it. Some of us worry, for example, that empty storefronts in town signify a stagnant local economy. We fail to notice that there are more businesses operating in Essex than ever before – perhaps just not in the downtown core – and that vacancies in fact open the way for new commercial enterprises to open.

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Or we make blanket statements about our town being a sleepy, bedroom community in which nothing ever happens. How many times has that sort of

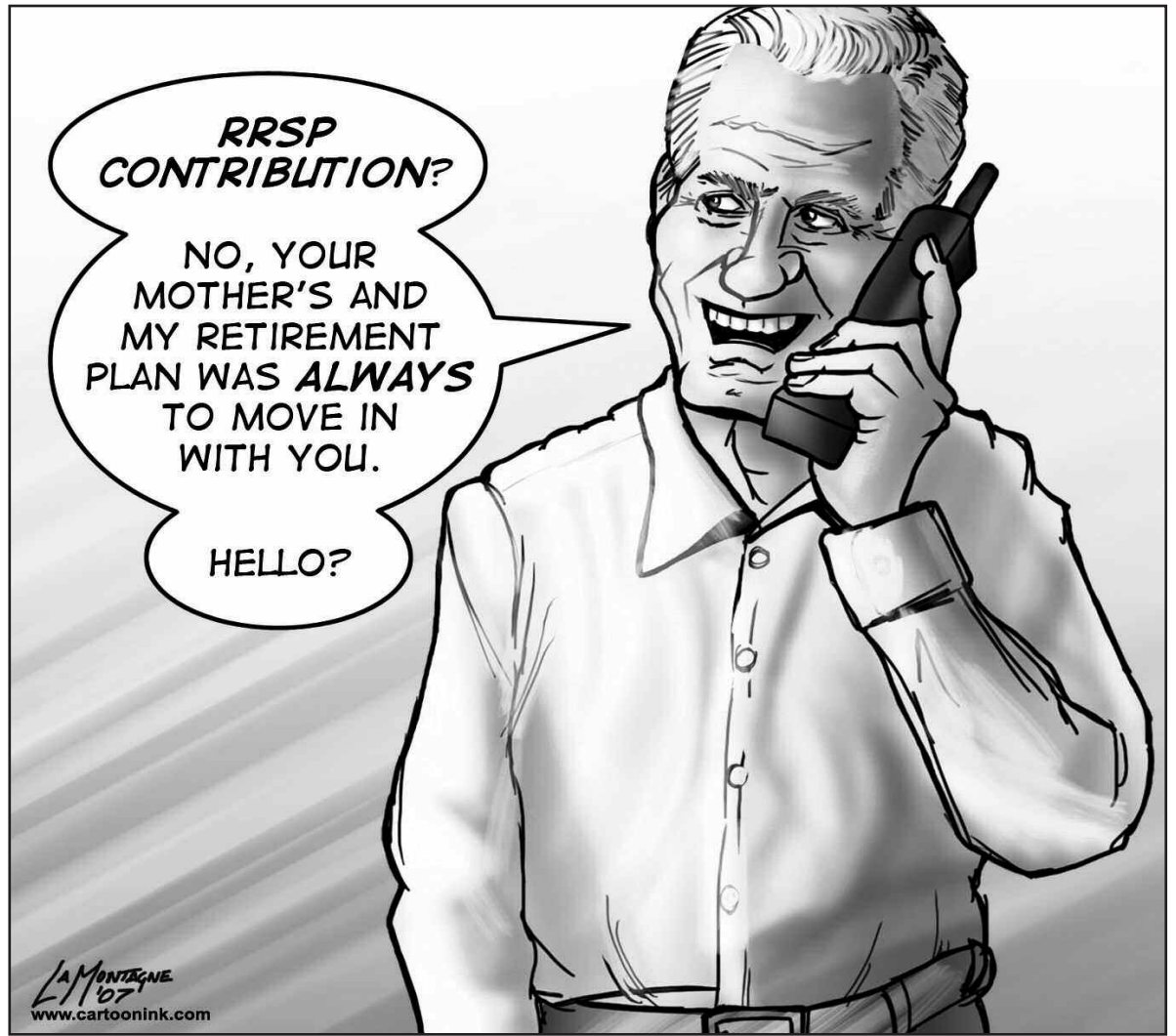
statement been heard in the very same week that town council made a major announcement, or a local business suffered a break-in, or a public event attracted hundreds or thousands of visitors to the community? Sometimes people just aren’t hooked into reliable news. The authors of “The Art of Possibility” best describe the optimist/pessimist dichotomy:

“Often, the person in the group who articulates the possible is dismissed as a dreamer or as a Pollyanna persisting in a simplistic ‘glass half-full’ kind of optimism. The naysayers pride themselves on their supposed realism. However, it is actually the people who see the glass as ‘half-empty’ who are the ones wedded to a fiction, for ‘emptiness’ and ‘lack’ are abstractions of the mind, whereas ‘half-full’ is a measure of the physical reality under discussion. The so-called optimist, then, is the only one attending to real things, the only one describing a substance that is actually in the glass.”

Examples of “glass half-full” thinking are plentiful in the Essex area. The Christian ministry that has converted the Thunderbowl into a church is a good example of people measuring their need and arriving at an unexpected solution. Who would have thought that a retired bowling alley could be turned to such a noble purpose? Apparently the people of Antioch Christian Ministries did.

The same can be said about the Essex Community Centre. Finding uses for vacant space in the former Holy Name School has required “glass half-full” thinking by town staff. Public meetings, recreational sports and a rock concert scheduled for Saturday are just some of the activities happening in a building that otherwise might have fallen into disrepair.

Hopefully that same type of thinking can be brought to bear as the town and Heritage Essex consider possible uses for the vacant Carnegie library building. Whether it’s ultimately to be used as a cultural centre, an economic development office or as commercial or retail space, it is “glass half-full” thinking that will undoubtedly lead to the answer.



Ontario citizens take justifiable pride in their communities. This can include economic pride, cultural pride, and other attributes they feel their particular community offers. But some Ontario communities are under stress.

St. Thomas has always called itself the Railway Capital of Canada. And indeed St. Thomas was Canadian headquarters for the New York Central Railway for many years. Many rail lines converged at St. Thomas until recently. Now the CN land department is trying to change the historic rail yards into housing units, taking with it the heritage roundhouse that houses the Elgin County Railway Museum.

St. Thomas Council, with support from the downtown BIA, has an offer to purchase the yards including four kilometres of track in the city proper but, as Ron Bareham from the museum board told me at the Essex train show last weekend, it’s anyone’s guess what will happen.

It should be noted St.



opinion
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Thomas has its own short line railway and an original train station in addition to the museum. This mess was all precipitated by CN’s decision to sever the line between Fargo (Blenheim) and St. Thomas that has served the U.S. and Canada since 1872.

Farther east at Smiths Falls, the 44-year-old Hershey plant is likely to close by the end of the year. Most of the 500 workers will lose their jobs. 150 manufacturing jobs have left the community in the past year. To make matters worse, over 800 jobs at Rideau Regional Centre appear to be gone as well. Smiths Falls stores have loved the hordes of chocolate-craving visitors who

come to their community each year. The Chocolate and Railway weekend (Smiths Falls is a major rail centre) attracts 8,000 people alone each July. And, of course, the Hershey company has been a generous corporate citizen for many years. Hershey’s restructuring apparently includes relocation to Mexico. Let’s face it, Smiths Falls losing Hershey is like Heinz leaving Leamington.

In both cases, St. Thomas and Smiths Falls, adversity is bringing people of good will together. With an October election looming in Ontario, and a federal election also in the wings, these two communities just might have some leverage in getting help from senior levels of government.

And there is more reason for optimism. If the achievers outnumber the finger pointers, and, if the will is there in both cities, their pride of community, strength of character and long record of achievement will bring them through. Giving up is not a helpful suggestion in either situation.

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