



The way she Druh it up had all the makings of putting city council on road to major upheaval

MEMORIAL DRIVE DEBATE

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You'd think she had ordered a golden statue of herself erected on the north bank of the Bow, instead of a few wooden barricades to close half a road.

The controversy over Ald. Druh Farrell's street party has totally overwhelmed the concept: Silly scheme or brilliant vision, her plan to close two lanes of Memorial Dr. has opened a chasm of lasting ill-will in city council.

Memorial Drive will indeed close, it was decided yesterday, after a bitter and highly personal debate by aldermen.

Those who opposed the idea were crushed in a vote that degenerated into name calling and a bizarre bit of anti-media poetry reading.

All this, for an idea so small and so irrelevant.

Most Calgarians won't notice the two-lane shut-down in August -- those that encounter the closure will soon forget, the way they forget traffic delays due to detours and construction.

A few Calgarians will attend Farrell's street party, and they'll likely deem it an enjoyable day, with two lanes blocked to cars and given over to pedestrians as a temporary riverside promenade.

It will then be forgotten, as summer fades into fall.

Forgotten by all but city council, where the repercussions of this political hand-grenade will echo for a long time, perhaps years to come.

What was a disagreeable group before the Memorial Dr. squabble is now a city council divided, with enemies and bitter foes firmly established.

All because of a few barricades. It was during their meeting yesterday when five aldermen challenged Farrell's pet project, calling it selfish to close a major traffic artery, when smaller roads would suffice.

Ric McIver, Joe Connelly, Jim Stevenson, Andre Chabot and Diane Colley-Urquhart tried to vote down the idea, but lost when the rest of council sided with Farrell.

Ald. Bob Hawkesworth stood up to read a strange poem, in which he blamed the media for stirring up the issue, while supporting the closure as a health benefit for pedestrians.

Farrell then slammed the five aldermen for trying to stop the closure, calling the item too petty for debate by city council.

"We have got better things to do," said Farrell, while asking council to vote against her opponents.

"This is trivial, it's petty; I find it insulting to Calgarians."

Petty is a great word for what this road-closure idea should have been, before it hit the political fan.

But Farrell's belief the closure is too trivial an issue for city council is totally wrong.

In fact, not allowing her elected colleagues to debate the idea is what created the whole Memorial mess in the first place.

Instead of bringing the idea to city council, a path followed by most aldermen wanting to try something new, Farrell just decided Memorial would close. She then discussed the street party with journalists, including this columnist, but not with city council -- which is why the debate blew up in the pages of the press, rather than council chambers.

Self-appointed poet Bob Hawkesworth can blame the media for doing its job, but asking for the opinion of both sides of an issue is what reporters do in a democracy. Sorry, Bob.

And democracies, usually, are where controversial ideas are debated, no matter how small and trivial they may seem.

In this case, there was no discussion, no vote and no possibility to hear opposing viewpoints in a public forum -- all things that would have kept tempers cool and perhaps helped to improve a good, but flawed, idea.

Not one person has argued against closing a road for a party -- it's the choice of road that has many Calgarians and a handful of politicians upset.

A city council debate, complete with input from traffic experts and the neighbouring community, would have answered all outstanding questions and made it clear whether Memorial Drive was a suitable choice.

Instead, we have a decision that was undemocratic and a city council that may now be incapable of governing without personal feelings and bitterness tainting the proceedings.

The most memorable thing about Farrell's Memorial Drive closure?

The damage done to city council.

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