

Parents, kids wage battle for "real food"



By Brock Weir

He might not vote yet, but Spencer Savage has his eye on the future.

This week, the young Aurora resident told elected officials that while he and his peers might not be able to vote quite just yet, they are the future homeowners of Aurora, future parents, and perhaps even future mayors and councillors. But to do that, he said they need a strong, healthy foundation.

Spencer was at Town Hall last Tuesday to help lead a vanguard of parents and advocates to advocate for healthy food, "real food" options in local vending machines and concession stands.

Calling on Council to set a higher standard when it comes to the amount of healthy food available at municipal facilities, particularly recreation centres, they said it was time to put the health of citizens ahead of a buck.

"Do you care about me?" asked Spencer. "Do you care about the kids in Aurora? I know we don't vote yet, but one day we will be the homeowners of Aurora, parents ourselves, and maybe even the mayor. For now, we're kids and we deserve every opportunity to grow up healthy and that is why we sign up for sports and activities in the Town's rec centres.

"I spent 10-15 hours a week there and sometimes my mom has to pack a snack because there are no healthy food options at the concessions. Why is that? Aren't the recreation centres places for health and fitness? Would you work out at the gym for an hour and then go and get a Big Mac? In school, we're taught to do the right thing above all else and take on leadership roles and set a good example to others, which is why I am here today. We're asking you to take a leadership role and do the right thing."

The right thing, according to the residents who gathered at Town Hall, is to put "real food first" at all community recreation centres and arenas.

The group of concerned parents "spearheaded by five local moms" collected over 700 signatures of support from local citizens who say it is time to do away with "a junk food first" approach to concessions.

Their efforts led to Council laying the ground work for a new contract with potential concessions vendors that will require them to provide at least 55 per cent healthy food options at both the concession counters and in vending machines.

"The Town's vision talks about being leaders and seeking innovative approaches and effective solutions," said local mom Tracy Smith. "I truly hope we can put that vision into practice this evening."

Ms. Smith said the initially recommended 25 per cent requirement was a step in the right direction, but it didn't jive with the Town's goals to promote healthy living and make Aurora the "most active community" in Canada.

The current state of snack bar affairs, she said, consistently virtually all candy, chocolate bars, sugary drinks and otherwise processed foods, all located next to recreation centres where "families and children go to enhance their health and vitality.

"The statistics right now on obesity in Canada are staggering," said Ms. Smith. "I think we need to do better than what was suggested in this report. I know we can do better. Regardless of the fear of trying something new or losing money, I think we all know that making these changes and shifting our focus is the right thing to do " for our families, for our children, our athletes, our grandkids, and ourselves. We all need real, nutrient-rich food to thrive, participate and fuel our bodies. We're here tonight to help

shape and create that vision with you and address some of the hesitations you may have and offer viable solutions, so together we can partner on transforming our current junk bars into a new type of snack bars.?

Part of their solution was boosting that initial recommendation of 25 per cent healthy content to 55 per cent, along with removing at least half of the currently offered ?treat food? and an effective communication strategy to get word out to residents.

Survey details were presented to Council in a staff report which indicated 81.5 per cent of residents thought it was important to have healthy food options, while 79 per cent were willing to put their money where their mouth is and buy healthy food items from concession stands in the future.

Yet, a recent pilot project to highlight a handful of healthy menu items was less than successful.

Concerned that Council members might not see healthy food items as a viable financial option, the parents said previously floated food items were not easily visible, had limited availability depending on which recreation centre you went to, and, when they were there, were not presented in the most appetizing manner.

Other delegates spoke to the financial aspect, including Elise Volpe, who said they have reached out to marketing groups in Aurora who have offered to help at no charge.

?We recognize some of you will have concerns related to the viability of this change,? said Ms. Volpe. ?We have heard that healthy food won't sell, the Town won't receive responses to the RFP and that other communities have not been successful. We feel strongly healthy foods will sell. Examples include Freshii, which has opened 370 stores since 2005 and will have almost 800 by 2019. From our research, we understand the keys to success are proper display of the food. Subsidizing healthy food by increased cost to junk food is a strategy that could help and is worth exploring. We must stick with the change, even if there is short-term push-back because it is the right thing to do.?

This was a sentiment shared by Spencer, who told Council, ?If you can spend \$72,000 on the dog park so that dogs can run freely and enjoy fitness and recreation, why can't you consider the importance of people's health, too? I hope you do the right thing and choose people over profits.?

Yet, this was the sentiment later expressed by Council.

?I don't know how you can put a price on the health of our kids and our residents,? said Councillor Tom Mrakas. ?I would prefer to see it go to 100 per cent, but I think 55 is a great start.?

Agreed Councillor John Abel: ?We shouldn't be looking to make a small profit at the expense of our children. It should be the other way around.?