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Youth Centre set for late 2014 despite price hike

By Brock Weir

Despite the increased price tag of $2.6 million, Aurora's Community Space for Youth, commonly called ?Youth Centre?, remains on track.

But as some Councillors claimed the Youth Centre as a vital vote of confidence in Aurora's youth and others claimed this was just a $7 million excuse to ?gussy up? the fading Complex (AFLC), it was a decision which continues to divide today's Council.

As The Auroran reported last week, Councillors were faced with a recommendation to increase the $4.5 million budget allocated in the 2013 Budget for the creation of the Community Space for Youth at the AFLC by $2.6 million for projects to bring the building back up to code, make it more accessible, and account for some of the requests made by youth helping to steer the project.

Councillors approved the increased costs 5-4 last Tuesday, with Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, and Councillors John Abel, Sandra Humfryes, Paul Pirri, and Michael Thompson supporting the initiative.

From the perspective of Mayor Dawe, the increased costs would be necessary in helping to rectify some of the mistakes in the past which lead to the widely criticized layout of the current building.

?We're paying for some of the latitude that happened,? he said of building standards at the time when ground was broken at the AFLC in 1986. ?I think the Youth were impressed with how this is unfolding and I think we're doing what we need to do to move along and ensure we have the facilities for [future] growth.?

Councillor John Abel argued there is ?no greater investment we can make? than in our youth. The Youth Centre, he added, has been on the backburner for over a decade and it was finally time to bring it into the fore and make it a reality. He had less praise for the building itself, however, noting he mulled over tearing the building down and starting fresh two years ago.

?We're going to build something that is going to last another 30 ? 50 years for our community and that is a very important asset,? he said. ?This site is the best site we have available apart from getting new land and something that might cost $20 million down the road. This is a good central place with public access. To say that the youth won't come is to ignore the registration we have [in Town programs].?

He was referencing comments made earlier in the discussions by Councillor Paul Pirri, who questioned the cost difference in building some aspects of public infrastructure today versus what they cost when originally constructed. When told the cost to build the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex would be significantly higher today than what it was built, he said now was the right time to begin building the Youth Centre.

?Aurora has always prided itself on providing for its residents,? said Councillor Pirri. ?Clearly costs have gone up over the last 10 years. If we don't move on this tonight, what is it going to cost to build this five years down the road? We also have to remember why we're building this facility and it is to accommodate new growth.?

Positive feedback from Aurora's youth on the Youth Centre has been received by Councillor Humfryes. The awareness level is there and there is excitement, she said.

?Will it be 100 per cent for youth? Let's see where it takes us, but it is a place they can call their own and I think we owe it to them,? she said. ?I believe in the investment of the youth in our community and the program speaks to it, the survey speaks to it, and I am looking forward to moving forward on this. It is a great thing
to do.?

Questioning whether this would truly be a place the youth will ?call their own?, were Councillors Chris Ballard, Evelyn Buck, Wendy Gaertner, and John Gallo.

Councillor Ballard, for instance, said bringing the cost of the Youth Centre up to $7.4 million underscores his concern from the earliest days that this is ?about the redevelopment of the Family Leisure Complex? under the guise of building a Youth Centre.? While he said he hoped youth would have ?priority? in the other aspects of the building beyond the 2,800 square feet of dedicated youth space, he said redeveloping the AFLC was a debate which should have happened early on.

?My sense is [youth] want a place they can call their own that is distinct from adults, a place where they can call their own and I am just not convinced other than the skateboard park that we're going to see a high uptake of usage with this centre for youth or whatever we're calling it,? he said.

The increased costs also gave Councillor Buck a moment of pause. She said it is hard to argue against the statement ?you have to do it for the kids?, but there was not enough time to inform the public about the increased costs.

?The imperative in my mind is you take the time and think about your options as you did in the beginning when you chose this facility,? said Councillor Buck. ?The price is almost double. Take the time and think about what else you can get out of that money. Can you build a new facility? Can you use the Old Library right in the heart of Town where your kids can walk and drop in? There are, and there were, options. We see this figure, we should surely be pausing for second thoughts.

?I am arguing against spending this amount of money because there might be better ways of spending it and getting more out of our money.?

Settling down into reading the agenda prior to the meeting, Councillor Gallo said he ?almost fell off his chair? reading the report on the cost increase and questioned whether it could be reduced if they lessened the scope of the building and limited it strictly to what would need to be done for the youth component rather than bringing the entire complex up to snuff. He agreed with Councillor Buck that now would be a good time to ?take a step back? and consider the options.

?To spend $6 million on a community space for youth which really isn't a community space for youth, with the exception of a 2,000 square foot space, to me that is not a Youth Centre and that is a very poor dedicated space for youth,? said Councillor Gaertner.