

Aurora calls on Lecce to get involved in deal to share school gyms

Aurora Council is calling on Minister of Education Stephen Lecce to help the Town forge an agreement with local school boards to share their gym spaces.

Council, sitting at the Committee level last week, approved a motion from Mayor Tom Mrakas to call on the Education Minister to assist in making school board facilities available to local municipalities like Aurora at a cost recovery rate. The motion also calls on school boards operating within Aurora to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Town for the shared use of school gymnasiums on evenings and weekends.

The Town of Aurora recognizes the importance of fostering community engagement and providing recreational opportunities, said the Mayor in his motion. Schools are funded by local taxpayers [and] existing school board policies/procedures do not prioritize municipal residency within their allocation of the use of space.

At the Council table, Mayor Mrakas said he had communicated with Minister Lecce on the issue.

I think we can all agree that at the end of the day we have close to 20 gymnasiums in the municipality and ultimately it is about making sure that they're used all the time and that our organizations, our residents, can get access to it. It's about creating an MOU working with the school board, working with the Minister, to create that MOU so that we can do something very similar that we do with our outdoor fields, similar to the MOU we have with St. Max with regards to the outdoor field, he continued, referencing St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School. At the end of the day, it's about creating more opportunities and more opportunity for all of our sporting organizations, all of our groups, anyone that wants to have access to a gym. We know that we're in a deficit when it comes to gymnasiums and instead of continuously having to build them, this is a way we can work together with the school boards and utilize those close to 20 gyms that are in our municipality currently.

The gym deficit was underscored in lawmakers' discussions by Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, President of Sport Aurora, who said that that organization and others have been looking for ways to streamline permit policies for their member organizations.

Integral in the success of an MOU, he said, was ensuring a balance between sports groups who might want to book the spaces along with municipal programs that might also need the spaces.

We're going to be moving forward to open up this inventory to sports organizations who, at this point in time, have an existential problem in front of them because some are pulling programs back, particularly at the younger age groups, and what that does is create problems as these children age, said Councillor Weese. I think this is the absolute right way to go, as long as we get it right.

Similarly, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland said she supported moving forward with the drive for an MOU in principle so long as it doesn't affect some of the local non-profit organizations and such who want to participate in gym use.

I know that there is adult recreation that often gets bumped out of these permits, too, so I definitely feel the pain and we're in dire need of space and that's where we are, she said. I want to support this and thank everybody for their advocacy on this.

Long-time Councillors Wendy Gaertner (Ward 3) and Michael Thompson (Ward 4) pointed out that gaining additional access to school gyms was a perennial issue for Council and this MOU could be a step in the right direction.

In my experience, the conversation around utilizing the school gyms has happened every term I've been on Council, said Councillor Thompson. This is not new, in my opinion. There has always been that need [and] for one reason or another there have been challenges. I know we have tasked staff in the past with motions to explore and have these conversations and unfortunately, we've never been able to come to an agreement.

Involving the Province and the Minister, he added, was 'essential' in making headway.

'We definitely need the Province to step forward and help us mandate this or open the door to be able to develop some sort of MOU so that we can move forward because the need has always been there. This is just not an Ontario problem. I am sure many municipalities and Provinces deal with it as well. For one reason or another, we have never been able to come to that understanding and I think it is essential that the Minister get involved to be able to pave the way. It makes no sense to have underutilized resources at a time when we're all facing shortfalls.'

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