

Aurora looks at installing air-supported dome to boost sports tourism

Aurora is considering a proposal to install an air-supported dome to increase sports programming and tourism.

At the July 11 Committee meeting, lawmakers voted in favor of a motion to start a feasibility study to provide a multi-gymnasium, air-supported structure that will provide sufficient additional indoor gymnasium space to meet present and future needs.

The motion was written by Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese and Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland.

'This motion is for Town staff to consider this type of structure as a solution for our lack of indoor courts as we move into a new Parks and Recreation Master Plan and plan for the future needs of our community. We need more courts now. And the future clearly states that it is irrefutable,' Councillor Weese said.

'The technology and engineering for air support structure for courts activity is solid and it's reliable. What remains is the feasibility for this type of facility to be reviewed by our Town staff in terms of land required for construction, either purchased or presently owned, and the opportunity to explore public or public private partnerships as was done in the early years than the existing sports dome so capital and operating expenses can be managed efficiently.'

Executive Director Jason Scott from the York North Basketball Association (YNBA) spoke on behalf of the organization to offer their full support of the motion.

Many sports groups struggle to access both quality and a condensed quantity of sports facilities that have courts, he said.

'At YNBA basketball, we are in absolute need of a multi court, ideally four plus court facility to properly serve Aurora residents with court sports programming such as camps, coaches, training clinics, house league practices and games, and rep training and rep games.'

In addition to the wide range of in-house programming, an air supported courts dome would open an opportunity for the Town to increase tourism and boost the local economy. As an example, Scott said other towns have brought in around \$5 million over one weekend of tournaments.

'Lots of places host two or three within a year. We know how to do it, we have the personnel that can get it done, and it's just a matter of insights to make it happen,' he said.

At one time, a lack of sporting facilities for provincial tournaments has led to lost opportunities for YNBA.

'We had to use up 13 sites all over York Region,' Scott said of a time when YNBA once hosted provincial tournaments. 'This triggered the Ontario Basketball Association (OBA) to stop using YNBA as a provincial host due to the inconvenience that the lack of condensed gym space caused the traveling tournament families.'

If the Town does not decide to conduct a feasibility study to bring additional sporting facilities to Aurora, Scott said he is afraid that they will have a difficult time serving the community that continues to grow in capacity.

'Whether it be women's leagues or whether it be leagues that are for those that are disabled, we have worked with local groups to do that before, but I've had a hard time finding facilities to make those kinds of things happen as well,' he said.

'I believe the truth is that hiring an outside group to do the study would be a waste of taxpayer dollars that could go into the facility itself,' Scott said about YNBA's capability and willingness to offer help with the feasibility study. 'We all know it's needed. It's not a matter of 'if' but 'how.''

Bruce Stafford, president of Storm Volleyball, also gave full support of the motion and reinforced that a new facility would benefit the local economy and sports programming.

"Storm Volleyball would love to have the opportunity to become one of the anchor tenants in a quality gym facility where we could run our programs and the Town programs along with other sport organizations," he wrote.

Ontario Volleyball alone runs an average of 130 tournaments every weekend at various locations from November through April and are "starving for more locations to handle the growth," he wrote.

Storm Volleyball hosts an average of 14 weekend tournaments on behalf of Ontario Volleyball at Huron Heights in Newmarket.

Stafford added that sports organizations need spaces as school boards have become less accommodating and unpredictable.

Adding on to the topic about economic development for the Town, Councillor Gilliland recalled past conversations with the OBA about the lack of hotels in Aurora which was another source of contention when choosing which municipality to host provincial tournaments.

"At least over 10 years ago, I had done some work at high level sports within Newmarket," she said. "We didn't have enough facilities in close proximity, but also we didn't have hotels, and now we have the hotels. So, this is just one next step to help increase our economic development or sports tourism strategy."

Mayor Tom Mrakas said he recalled when the Ontario Basketball Association held a championship game in Newmarket which prompted the inspiration to one day host a similar event in Aurora.

"I'm looking forward to that day when we do have that championship here, so I look forward to all of us working together on that," he said.

For less than \$8 million, an adjacent northern community has a 50,000 square foot courts dome with a clubhouse and amenity space that houses five full-sized basketball courts and 10 full-sized volleyball courts with additional pickleball dedicated space, Councillor Weese said.

"This would be sufficient for the present and the future needs for indoor space and will enable numerous sports to use this venue for training and competition and regular lead and play but for sport tourism as well as our delegate suggested," he said.

Councillor Weese said he hoped that the decision could be included in the 2024 or 2025 budget.

In response to a question from Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim, Director of Finance Rachel Wainwright-van Kessel said the proposal would be considered a capital project as it's an investment in new facilities.

"So, even any of the consulting work that would go into the design would be part of that capital project," she said.

Town staff will be directed to consider including funds in 2024 and 2025 as part of the 2024 Budget and the 10-Year Capital Plan. They will also look to include location and partnership options within the review.

Staff will also be directed to consult with Local Sport Organizations to identify specific needs for the courts dome that will meet training and competition needs as well as sport tourism opportunities.

By Elisa Nguyen