

Council leans towards single gymnasium for the SARC

A new gymnasium could soon become a reality at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex.

Council this month is set to approve the construction of a single gymnasium after giving it the tentative green light at the Committee level last Tuesday.

If ultimately approved, the single gym would cost \$11.3 million and go towards meeting an already identified shortfall of gymnasium facilities in Town. The finished product would sport a 24-foot ceiling and span 8,500 square feet.

The single gym was one of two options presented to Council, the second being a 16,600 square foot double gymnasium at a cost of \$18.8 million. But although a double gym is what local sports organizations have been pushing for, according to municipal staff, the double option proved difficult for many reasons.

“One of the main things that came out of [consultation with organizations] was a strong desire for a double gymnasium because it would allow for competition use, particularly with volleyball and basketball,” said Lisa Warth, Recreation Manager for the Town. “They told us they would not be able to run tournaments and that type of thing with just a single gymnasium. It would allow for a full game, but it wouldn’t allow for any type of tournament use or that sort of thing.”

While the budget was a factor standing in the way of a double gym, environmental concerns were at issue.

The gym is slated to be constructed in the southwest corner of the SARC adjacent to the entrance of the David Tomlinson Nature Reserve. A single gym will encroach slightly onto environmental lands, but will not be a significant concern, staff said. A double gym, however, could have an impact on provincially significant wetlands.

“I just don’t see [the double gym] as a viable option,” said Mayor Tom Mrakas. “We know it would be needed, it is in demand, we know it is something our sporting organizations would like to utilize and would attract [as] a sports tourism site, but I don’t think the site is viable if it is encroaching.”

Councillor Rachel Gilliland said she was “disappointed” at the feasibility of the double gym, recognizing sports groups’ desire to have more tournament options within Aurora, but added one gym would still help the Town meet demand.

“We need a single gym, but essentially we need five,” she said. “I am happy to support the single gym [as] it seems the double gym would be extremely complicated because of parking, the wetlands and land acquisition and it doesn’t seem like it will be in our favour. We have to fulfil some of the demand and this facility that already has a lot of other things on offer for the community, it makes sense for it to be all in one spot.”

Councillor Wendy Gaertner had a similar view.

“I know [the sports community] would love a double gym [but] we have an economic and environmental reality that we do have to deal with and we would have to deal with in a second gym,” she said. “I don’t think it is in the range of possibility for this Town and I apologise for the disappointment [the sports community] must have.”

This “economic reality” was enough for Councillor John Gallo to oppose the project. While he stressed he was not against building these types of facilities, he said he didn’t think it was the right time for Aurora with significant capital projects currently underway, including the ongoing construction of Aurora Town Square.

“I do not think we should be going into even more debt,” said Councillor Gallo on the project’s plan to debt finance the gym build and pay it off through incoming development charges. “This Council will be borrowing, if this moves forward, somewhere around

\$50 million. Never in the history of Aurora have we put this corporation into that much debt in one term. That is somewhere around \$800 for each resident. I'll make a prediction right now that this is going to be a \$15 million project. This is the history of how these projects grow (in Aurora).?

In response, Mayor Mrakas said when the SARC was first built, adding a gym onto the building at the time would cost less than \$5 million and the decision to not proceed then has cost the Town in the long-run.

?It has been left to us now with an incredible cost increase but we have to make these decisions,? he said. ?We're not making a decision tonight; what we're looking at is let's get that final design and get absolute value for our community. We can't just look four years down the road; we have to look 15, 20, 30 years down the road, long after any of us will be sitting here. We have to do what's best for the community.?

Similarly, Councillor Michael Thompson said he too shared concerns over cost-increases, but stated upcoming plans will underscore the need to move forward.

?We did recognize there was a need in 2016 and I am sure the new Parks & Recreation Master Plan will reiterate the need,? he said. ?As we go through the Official Plan and look at the population increase, it is going to reinforce the fact we need that as well.?

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