

Rock climbing wall misses AFLC opening, awaiting supervisor

By Brock Weir

As kids fanned out through the Aurora Family Leisure Complex (AFLC) on Saturday morning as the long-awaited facility re-opened, a plywood board prevented them from lacing up and ascending the building's new rock climbing wall.

The climbing wall is expected to be open by the end of this week, pending the hire of a new part-time supervisor to keep an eye on those daring to take it on.

Council approved a recommendation from Aurora's Parks and Recreation Department this week for two new positions to staff the AFLC, including one full-time youth programmer expected to be hired this June, and a part-time position to staff The Loft, the building's youth space, as well as supervise the wall.

The Council green light, however, came after considerable debate around the table, with some questioning why hours to supervise the climbing wall could not be found amongst the 200-strong team of part-timers currently employed by the Parks and Recreation Department.

This was a discussion that needed to be had, they said, considering the 2015 residential tax increase, currently standing at 5.66 per cent on Aurora's portion of your annual tax bill.

“5.66 is still too high, and we need to continue to look at ways to mitigate that tax pressure,” said Councillor Michael Thompson. “I am not in favour of the [part-time position]. I hope that Mr. Downey can look within his department to man that operation through his various part-time budgets for the time being.”

This was a viewpoint shared by Councillor Tom Mrakas, who said residents across Aurora are being asked to do a little bit of extra work in their jobs and take on more responsibilities, and the Town should do the same.

“I think it is just principally wrong to ask the same residents that are doing that to pay a little extra when it comes to taxes and for us to have someone there dedicated for this wall when we can take a couple of the others that are there [to put in] a little extra time and effort in their positions and add double duty, I don't see a problem with having staff do that. I think it is fiscally responsible for us.”

The budget for this new part-time position is slated to be \$25,000 for 2015, a figure which is reduced to \$10,000 in subsequent years.

Responding to these concerns, Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, said re-allocating staff may result in delaying the opening of the rock climbing wall, and service levels would be impacted in other areas if Council chose that way forward. Staff need to be trained to supervise the wall.

“If I was going to re-allocate staff, I wouldn't necessarily do it on an overtime basis,” said Mr. Downey. “I would either change their shifts [or] reduce their other responsibilities elsewhere. The issue here is a cost savings. If you're asking me not to hire somebody, I don't know that I would then go off and put somebody in overtime and spend that money elsewhere. Until those staff are in place, we will not be experiencing a full [youth] program. However, we will be developing some level of programming.

“It wouldn't be the programming we envision for the youth centre upon the opening of the centre. We had always envisioned staff resources allocated for those activities. If they are not, then we have to spread ourselves out.”

The majority of Council, however, opted to go ahead with the position for the time being, with some arguing it is too late in the game to change course on a position that was always needed from the beginning.

‘We need to be fiscally responsible and every dollar counts, absolutely, but we spent a lot of time developing the facility and I think this position was brought forward to us initially in what was anticipated for a youth centre,’ said Councillor Sandra Humfries, noting she would like to see the roles of the supervisor and the youth coordinator amalgamated.

Councillor John Abel, on the other hand, noted this position accounted for just one tenth of one per cent and the pros outweigh the cons.

‘It is the launch of our youth centre,’ he said. ‘We’re going to take the smiles off the children that are going to be standing there at the wall [asking] why they can’t climb it. I think it is very important that we start off on the right foot, that we have properly manned [facilities] and trained people, and we launch this youth centre in an impactful way. If we have to make a little more effort as we go down the road, I am in full support of that.’

Speaking in favour of moving forward with this hire, Mayor Geoff Dawe said it was a position that was always anticipated. After he asked Mr. Downey what the course of action would be if Council gave him two weeks to ‘get creative’ in filling this spot with the staff at hand, Mr. Downey said full-time staff would immediately be re-allocated to train others, but there would be delays until everyone was ready to go.

‘We have to accept responsibility for the fact we’re going to change our service levels somewhere else,’ concluded Mayor Dawe. ‘If that is a decision we wish to make, I am fine with that. I don’t think it is fair to [change course] at the last minute. We can say, next year in the 2016 budget, this is the way we want to see you go.’

For Councillor Harold Kim, the value of this position will make itself clear down the road. At this point, he said, usage of the climbing wall is an unknown. If it proves popular, the Town should maintain it.

‘I feel like I am taking the keys away from Santa Claus,’ he said. ‘I am hesitantly willing to move forward and give my vote. If there is another week or so for Mr. Downey to come back to us with alternate options, that would be my first choice. If he truly believes that there is no time for those options, I am willing to move forward.’