

Sports groups want bigger voice in ?messaging? at rec centres

By Brock Weir

Advertisements are among the first thing visitors see on the walls of the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex (SARC), but these ads should give way to the promotion of sports groups and healthy messaging, according to advocates.

Later this year, Council will begin tackling the 2017 Budget and, in doing so, will consider engaging a consultant to develop ?an enhanced business case? regarding advertising and sponsorship programs and opportunities in facilities like the Aurora Family Leisure Complex (AFLC) and SARC.

In doing so, they will also consider giving sport organizations ?strong consideration? related to the use of lobby walls in the SARC.

Council has approved that recommendation following a delegation by Nancy Black of the Aurora Sport Hall of Fame, the organization which will have a predominant presence at the SARC in years ahead. Ahead of the meeting, Council faced a recommendation to give sports groups ?priority? when it comes to wall space, but this was toned down after Council members expressed reservation on what that might mean for advertising revenue.

?The [Town's] Sports Plan ensures that attention will be paid to the promotion and celebration of sport as we move forward,? said Ms. Black. ?When [the Hall of Fame] moves into the SARC, we want guests to engage and, in some cases, we want to motivate them and have a call to action. We want to inspire them. Thusly, beautifying the SARC with what we have planned to do will go a long way in doing that.

?You have a mandate to raise funds and this kind of advertising may have been one of your best options at the time, and I don't want to get into how you do your business. But, I do hope that your team [can see] the bigger picture and figure out a better way to bring in that revenue without having multiple ads displayed throughout the main hall of the Complex. In fact, a more beautiful SARC would be more sellable, potentially, so I think you can do both beautify and bring in revenue, just not like this.

?What if instead of the pop machines, there were inspirational messages and interactivity designed to engage visitors??

Many Council members around the table were supportive of the idea ? or at least the philosophy behind it ? but got stuck on the recommendation of giving sports groups ?priority? access to potentially revenue-generating areas.

?I think there is an opportunity for us to collaborate on making the facilities a little bit more inspirational rather than just functional,? said Councillor Michael Thompson.

But, Councillor Jeff Thom, who works in sports advertising, said while he was excited to move forward on a new strategy, there was an opportunity to make improvements while maintaining existing advertisers and ad revenue.

?I appreciate the vision of Nancy Black,? said Councillor Thom. ?I can also appreciate the concern with the way the lobby of the SARC looks to visitors, although I believe there is value to the advertisers for the advertising that is currently there. Certainly as a part of the strategy moving forward as a Town and looking at our advertising and everything associated with that, there may be ways to make the advertising more aesthetically pleasing and increase revenue.?

According to Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, had sports groups been given priority access to the wall space, 20 advertising spaces at the SARC alone would be impacted. Each sign brings in \$48 per month and collectively the Town would lose \$1,000 in advertising revenue per month if they couldn't place the signs elsewhere. But, he added, there would be opportunities to find alternative locations.

?I understand the vision Ms. Black has for the SARC,? said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. ?I think it is going to be amazing and a

huge improvement for that recreation facility that is looking a little bit sad at the moment. But, this is a public space and community centre and I think there is a fine line between using the community centre to promote sport and using it to raise money through advertising to try and offset the expense of the building to the taxpayer. There is nothing in this report that says what money we would lose if we discontinued advertising for the wall space Ms. Black has in mind and I don't think we can make that kind of decision without knowing the kind of money we're talking about.

?I am uncomfortable having pretty much the whole of the building under the umbrella of the Hall of Fame, Sport Aurora, or whatever because it is a community facility. [But] it is going to be so great once Ms. Black and her group improves it that I know the advertisers are just going to be standing wanting to advertise there.?