

Subsidies aim to break down barriers to recreation programs

Subsidies will help more Aurorans, particularly low-income families, take part in municipal recreation and sport programs, according to a review of the Town's current pricing policies.

Local lawmakers are eyeing a subsidy program of up to \$100,000 to break down financial barriers that might keep individuals from making full use of the programs the Town has to offer.

The recommendations to Council came as part of a review of the Town's Community Services User Fee and Pricing Policy, which has not been updated since 2009, as well as the Recreation Access Policy.

Presented at the Committee level last week, the policy recommendations aim to engage as many residents as possible in recreation by ensuring that cost is not a barrier.

According to consultants carrying out the study, public engagement resulted in a number of themes rising to the top which, in turn, helped shape the policy. Ensuring fairness in fees, the Town's cost to provide these services, and cost recovery emerged as common threads, as was the principle that fees should be the lowest for programs that benefit the most number of Aurora residents.

There was support to include residents experiencing low income as much as possible, said consultant Anand Desai. By sharing in the cost to provide recreation services, participants are contributing to the sustainability and longevity of Aurora's recreation system. Thus, fees should recoup a portion of the direct costs to provide those services. Services that are subsidized the most are those that benefit the maximum number of Aurora residents while services that will require the largest share of the costs, as reflected in higher pricing, are those that benefit fewer numbers of residents.

User fees should not be a barrier to all programs and services and thus there should be a balance of no fee and low fee choices available to the Town's Recreation Services offerings.

An additional consideration is that fees should consider the local and regional markets to make sure prices are comparable.

Although there are instances where fees have been subsidized, consultants carrying out the study found there was no regular funding allotted to help shoulder these costs for residents, nor is there any set criteria determining who might be eligible.

Pre-COVID, 45 low-income families received the department's in-house subsidy, which amounts to less than three per cent of Aurora residents living below Statistics Canada's low-income measure after tax, said Mr. Desai. To help, a formalized fee assistance policy can help as many residents as possible to obtain the benefits of recreation, which really is the Town and Recreation Department's mandate. It can help and encourage participation among residents experiencing low income, it can promote principles of inclusion and social justice. It can reduce cost spent on health and social services by having people more engaged in healthy, positive behaviours and lifestyle choices, attain higher levels of facility and program use, as well as improve financial performance.

If we're getting people in the door and they would not otherwise be in the door if they were priced out of the market, we are retaining some level of revenue there. This type of policy does support [and encourage active and healthy lifestyles].

The proposal of a \$100,000 subsidy program was, they said, based on best practices in other municipalities and also took into consideration the average number of programs a resident could reasonably be expected to participate in.

The idea was warmly received around the Council table last week, with Councillor Harold Kim stating he was glad there was data behind the figure.

If we [have only] received applications for 4,000 or 5,000 over the last years, we have glaringly under-captured the full potential of

the nine per cent of residents and eleven per cent of children [considered low income],? he said. ?For us, to reach our goals, we have to ensure that.?

Also expressing support for the proposal was Councillor Wendy Gaertner who questioned what seniors had to say about subsidies during the consultation process.

?We had representatives of older adults and seniors,? said Mr. Desai. ?Throughout the process, through consultations, the focus group we held with agencies and representatives of persons experiencing low income, the Aurora Seniors' Centre was represented there. We did hear from older adults that affordability was of prime importance to a number of them. [For many], their sources of income are fixed. They are sensitive to any kind of increases in price, but that being said, they did mention that they appreciate the staff at the Aurora Seniors' Centre, those who use it, and they welcome that relationship and value it very much in terms of staff's understanding and the Seniors' Centre also does have mechanisms to assist with membership costs and program costs, so those were of very high value to residents that contributed to us.?

The proposed policy changes will be up for further consideration by Council near the end of the month.

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