

AFLC accessibility to improve for mobility-challenged users

By Brock Weir

Mobility-challenged users have broken through the door on one of the last remaining obstacles at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex.

Council last week agreed to a key change suggested to the long-running overhauls, renovations, and subsequent fixes at the complex (AFLC) following complaints from members of the public.

While they rejected replacing a swath of lockers at a cost of \$166,000 or nearly \$3,000 per new locker the north door to the facility will once again be opened to allow greater access, but just to those with mobility challenges and recognized disabilities.

The north entrance to the AFLC was closed to the public as part of the renovations to have all users funnel through one entrance as a registration checkpoint. This, however, provided an obstacle for some and they weren't shy in raising their concerns.

As we know, when the Complex re-opened, a lot of issues were quickly identified, said Janet Matthews, a resident and regular user of the Town's aquafit program, who served on the Town's committee to oversee fixes to the facility following the renovations.

Ms. Matthews argued that inadequate consultation had taken place with members of the public, and users in particular, something she said demonstrated a level of disrespect that was hard to countenance.

When you don't take the time for adequate research before you begin your project, you are going to be solving problems after the fact and paying for a whole lot more as a result, she said. These [aquafit] programs are utilized by many older adults and most of us just don't move as fast or as well as we used to. We rely on the pool to maintain flexibility and mobility. At the Leisure Complex, four classes are specifically for those who are suffering from arthritis who are over 55, but the long hike from the front parking lot to the door, and then to the pool, is problematic for many people.

Many of the participants suffer from mild to moderate mobility issues, but they are certainly not disabled and they do not qualify for a card permit. These people are part of the aging demographic of Aurora which includes all of us. Let's fix it for everyone. Although the Complex is legally compliant with accessibility laws, this situation discourages participation. With or without the permit, these people feel they have been disregarded. They feel seriously disrespected and they are angry.

While Ms. Matthews said she supported the view of opening up the rear door to any paid user of the facility using a key fob system, the majority of Council opted to make access narrower to those specifically with challenges.

I think having a fob system at the back to accommodate them is very much appropriate and reasonable, said Councillor Michael Thompson. [But] I struggle [with allowing access for all paid users] because I think it does become an issue of who has access and who doesn't. Personally, I think access to the back door should be strictly by fob and strictly those who qualify for mobility challenges.

Mayor Dawe was also in favour of limited access, adding there was extensive engagement with the community on changes to come before the AFLC was largely closed for the renovations.

What I have heard is some people didn't like it, they didn't participate and now they don't like it still, said Mayor Dawe, citing a recent conversation he had with a mayor of an Israeli town near the Gaza border, and the struggles they face, in an effort to encourage perspective on the AFLC issue.

I have no problem with the \$15,000 for those folks who are in a way they need shorter access through the back door. I do not agree with opening it up to everybody. That is not the intention of what the plan was.

?Quite frankly, I am offended by people who seem to be horribly offended by the horrible thing we have done with the Family Leisure Complex. We need perspective on this and [that meeting] sure brought perspective to me. I would much rather live in a place where I would have to walk around a building where I am going to exercise than to worry about dodging rockets. It changes your opinion on things.?

While Councillors Sandra Humfryes and Tom Mrakas voted in favour of the latter's motion to make key fobs available to all users, Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she found the discussions ?disheartening.?

?What we are trying to do as a Council is ensure we have our residents as active as much as they can for as long as they can and be in sport to the best of their ability,? she said. ?The issue is for people who, as it says, are not disabled. They are just getting older and they have mobility issues.

?The population is aging. We are having mobility issues. It is a courtesy to open up that back door and allow these people who are trying to stay active to enter respectfully. With respect to opening that door to anyone else, the whole idea is the back parking lot is flat. It is the closest parking lot to the pool. If we open it up to everyone else, including the skaters who are very able-bodied, we will be taking that use away from exactly the users my motion is to address.?