

Aurora officially opens Loft youth space



By Jake Courtepatte

Just in time for National Youth Week, the youth of Aurora received a gift that should keep on giving for years to come.

Saturday marked the grand opening of the new Aurora Youth Centre, located at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex on Industrial Parkway North.

Architects, Town representatives, and citizens gathered in front of the new concrete skate park out front of the facility, which was already being used by over a dozen kids.

Built in 1986, the Leisure Complex closed in November of 2013 for renovations. The facility received a major upgrade for \$7 million before opening earlier this year, amid criticism, and criticism followed from users on the finished result.

But the youth centre, known as The Loft, has received a much more positive response from its users.

According to Mayor Geoff Dawe, the project was a long time coming.

?I think it actually started way back in the mid-90s with some visions,? said Mayor Dawe. ?We [needed] to offer more to youth. We had fewer people registered in seniors programs, but we had a seniors' facility. Now we're correcting that level of service within our community.?

Aside from the large-scale skate park, the facility now boasts an indoor climbing wall, a gymnasium, and even a teaching kitchen.

Council has high hopes for the centre ? and the numbers are already starting to show with a recent increase in membership in the overall facility.

?It's such a pleasure to now come in here, especially to someone who spent time in the old facility, which was somewhat old and dingy,? said Mayor Dawe. ?The changes and strides made here are just amazing.?

Many Councillors were also at the unveiling, including Councillors John Abel, Sandra Humfries, Jeff Thom, Harold Kim, and Tom Mrakas.

Council hired Aurora's first youth coordinator in 2000, opening up a youth program initiative that, at the time, the town was starved of. There are now 148 youth programs run by the town throughout the year.

Prior to the building of the youth centre, these programs were being run out of 19 different facilities in Aurora and the surrounding

area.

"This is such a convenience for our kids," said Al Downey, Director of Parks and Recreation. "To be able to provide programming in one location."

Council approved a "youth needs analysis" in March of 2011, which identified the steps needed to take to provide the most for the town's youth. What came out of it was a need for more space for physical activity.

"What we heard was a need for a multi-purpose facility in that we were able to simply upgrade some of the areas that we already offered, such as the pool and the rink," said Mr. Downey.

Multi-purpose or not, it's clear that the biggest draw of the facility for youth is the skate park. Its popularity was cemented even before it was built, as Mr. Downey admits that the biggest cheer when they presented to the high schools came upon its announcement.

And those showing off their moves at the grand opening echoed their sentiments.

"It's really got everything you need," said Shawn Downey, a teenage skateboarder. "Like rails, a bowl, quarterpipes, they did a good job."

Downey's friend and fellow skateboarder Devon said the bowl was something that he didn't expect, as you don't find them at a lot of skateparks.