

Aurora Seniors' Centre continues growth after 10 years in new home



By Brock Weir

It was the early 1960s when the women of the Beta Sigma Phi sorority were looking for inspiration on their latest community service project.

Each year, the young women decide on one or two initiatives that would be the focus of their energy for the 12 months ahead. Some projects were big, some projects were small, but each one was intended to have a positive impact on the local world around them.

Few of their projects, however, have the sheer endurance of the Aurora Seniors' Centre, which celebrated the 10th anniversary of their latest home on John West Way last week.

In those early days, two of the 13 women active in the sorority of the time were Betty Pedersen, who later served as a municipal councillor, and Barbara Stoecklin.

"Nobody had any ideas," says Ms. Stoecklin of the creative impasse her sorority was experiencing in 1963.

But then, a brainstorm. She hit upon the idea of a Seniors' Centre. It was, of course a well-intentioned idea, but the big question was how to bring the rest of the community on board too.

"We had to get names," recalls Ms. Stoecklin. "I had three children then, so I put the playpen in the back of the station wagon, put the children in the back, and brought them ? and the playpen ? into Town Hall, put them in a corner, and [staff] gave me these big books of the tax assessments.

"I sat there for four hours, wrote down all the names of the people over 60 years of age in the Town of Aurora. It took four hours, but the kids never said a word. After getting all the names, I went to our meeting the following week and they were astonished I got all 700 names. We formed a committee, wrote hundreds of letters ? all on typewriters with carbon copies ? and asked them if they would be able to come to a public meeting."

As an added enticement, the sorority promised a guest speaker in the form of Crawford Rose, a popular doctor of the day ? and, by then, a former mayor of Aurora ? with a lecture on "Milestones in Medicine." Over 70 residents came out to that first meeting, which was held in Victoria Hall and, given the size of the room, the idea was pitched to a standing-room only crowd.

Thus, the Aurora Seniors' Centre was born.

From that first meeting, it kept its roots relatively close by, setting up shop in Aurora's former fire hall, immediately south of Victoria Hall. About 12 years ago, however, it was clear they had far outgrown their existing space but, they did not have any immediately obvious solution on where to go.

Through conversations with the municipality, the Town of Aurora and the Aurora Seniors Association put their heads together and developed the present Seniors' Centre just across the parking lot from Town Hall. This multi-use facility, which includes meeting rooms, a large multi-purpose hall, library, woodshop, full professional kitchen, and numerous other amenities, continues to serve its purpose. But, with Aurora's growing senior population, this new facility might soon be at capacity as well.

Prepared to take on that possible challenge in the decade ahead is Jim Abram, president of the Aurora Seniors' Association, who was voted into the position earlier this year, succeeding Charles Sequeira, who was instrumental in the development of the John West Way facility.

"This is very important to our seniors," he said, adding he has been a proud member of the Centre for five years. "When I started to play poker, for instance, we were in the small Wycliffe Room and it only had about eight people. Now, we're pushing five tables and over 40 people are coming. A lot of our activities are becoming more and more popular.

"We can't add onto this building, so it is a matter of how to repurpose the rooms. We're signing another 10-year agreement with the Town, and we're partners with the Town in terms of operations of the Centre. We will be alive and kicking, still growing, and still catering to the needs of an active senior community."

Ms. Stoecklin was in her 30s when she spent hours poring over the tax rolls laying the foundation for what has become the Aurora Seniors' Association, but her involvement didn't stop there. She served on the Association's Board of Directors for over 10 years, fostering its growth and being a key part in its development. While she might be content to "let the younger ones take over now", her involvement remains as strong as ever.

"This the best place," she says. "It's friendly, very open, and coffee is 25 cents. Where else can you get coffee now for 25 cents? This is my second home."