

Ballooning costs might spell the end of new gym for the SARC

Ballooning costs related to the planned single-gym gymnasium at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex (SARC) may lead to its cancellation.

Last week at the Committee level, Council was asked to approve a further \$2.83 million for the project to make it a reality, but the sticker shock led to lawmakers voting down the project with the hope that alternative solutions can be found.

Additional gym space is a high priority for the Town, one that has been identified by sport and user groups across the community, and also one that has been identified in the Town's updated Parks and Recreation Master Plan, which also got the tentative green light on June 6. But a budget that has almost doubled in size since due to material and labour costs, among other factors, since it was first approved in the previous Council term was a bridge too far for many.

“The scope of work that was presented as part of the approved budget at this time last year in 2022 was to include a single [high school-size] gymnasium, multiple lines for various sports, change rooms, a separate hallway,” said Robin McDougall, Director of Community Services, responding to questions from Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese on how much had changed since the initial approval.

While Councillors didn't dispute the current need for more gym space, many argued the money could be spent on more practical solutions. Time could also be used to explore further relationships with the local school boards and independent schools on partnership opportunities, they said.

“I am having a hard time with the number almost doubling,” said Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland on how things had shifted since 2022. “Going up \$14 million really surprised me” and it makes me question, are we putting our best dollars forward on the best use with the single gym? Is there a better opportunity with a different type of structure (such as a bubble) that might give us more court space for less money?”

Beyond the price tag itself, funding was also top of mind.

The report before Council noted moving forward with the updated costs for the single gym might negatively impact future Development Charge (DC) funding for Parks and Recreation, including a new recreation centre for the community that has been part of the Town's long-range capital plans for years.

“If, in our plan right now, it says in 10 years we should be building a new recreation centre and this is actually going to put a damper on it over one gym, I question whether or not we're going forward in the right way,” concluded Councillor Gilliland. “Are we thinking outside the box enough and seeing what those other opportunities are? It will be interesting for us to look.”

Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, one of the most vocal proponents of a new gym for the SARC, acknowledged the “shock and disappointment at the rapid escalation of costs,” something he said he didn't think anyone could have imagined over the last year.

“We just approved a Parks and Rec Master Plan,” he said. “It speaks to that recommendation about pursuing the development of the municipal gymnasium at the SARC and also over and above that, including opportunities to utilize new air-supported domes and so forth to address the need. It's a shortfall. Part of our role is to ensure we're meeting or exceeding the needs of our residents and time and again we have demonstrated a need. Within the Master Plan, it talks about the fact that they have assessed the demand for the SARC expansion over the years and they continue to see a rise in the need for gymnasium space.

“If we're to meet the needs of the community and address the growth of the community over the next five or ten years, we need to make a decision with respect to gymnasiums. Maybe Council decides that this is not the right opportunity, but it needs to be replaced

with something and it needs to be replaced with something quickly? I would like to see us able to address this issue tonight, or this term. I have yet to hear a viable option that [meets] our needs.?

Current needs were also a consideration for Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim who said part of Council's job is to provide services, and this one is ?badly needed.?

?We have to make an important and critical decision because there is obviously a need,? he said. ?We punted the ball down the field for another later decision where it is going to get even more expensive. We had this discussion for about six years and had the opportunity to build something before this [financial] situation arose and my fear is we're going to punt this again. It's not getting any cheaper, life doesn't get any cheaper.

?What's our priority? Is it to provide service to residents? Maybe those in other demographics don't see the need for a gym at this time, but there are other demographics where a gym is important. It's a tough one.?

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, on the other hand, said he was ?concerned? when the budget was \$9 million, he was concerned when the budget was last boosted by \$3 million, and he remained concerned with the latest ask. Questioning whether any portions of the project could be whittled down to save some money, he said he was ?really trying to find a solution? for the issue.

?Even if this doesn't move forward, I still want to find solutions,? he said. ?We need to find a solution to this and I would suggest that we put our heads together and maybe on the political side figure out how to have a better relationship with school boards because those are assets that are currently available, they're in our community and they were paid for by taxpayers.

?Between now and Council, with some additional information and discussions, I will make my decision ? and I sincerely believe that either we step up to the plate and from the political side reach out to the school boards and figure out what the stumbling blocks are.?

Echoing comments made by Councillor Gallo that some sports groups have stepped forward to say a single gym won't meet their needs, Councillor Weese asked how they would address the ?three, four, five other basketball courts? Aurora needs.

?It seems to be we're spending a lot of money on that box?that won't fit a lot of the needs of the people we have,? he said.

This, too, was an issue for Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said she had been ?against? spending this kind of money on just one gym.

?We need two gyms. I know we don't have the room for them but that doesn't mean we should spend all this money on one gym,? she said. ?I would love to provide it but I don't think we can and I don't think when people come to this gym and we're a little familiar with gyms, people generally assume they're going to be able to take a shower. I don't think residents are going to be very pleased at spending all this money and not having a shower. A lot has been said that would support our position, but I am not going to repeat it.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter