

Construction on SARC gym expected to be complete in March 2024

A new gymnasium for the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex (SARC) is expected to be complete by March of 2024 following Council's approval last week.

Council signed off on the \$11.125 million gymnasium extension to the recreation complex located on Wellington Street East, just east of Leslie Street, on June 28 on a vote of 5 ? 2.

For supporters of the project, it was a long-overdue decision to address a shortage of recreation space identified in the Town's Parks and Recreation Plan. For others, the cost was simply too high or would not make a big enough dent in the rec shortage.

The gym will be part of a larger renovation project that will include, in addition to the gym, dry changerooms, storage, a revamped administration and customer service space at the SARC, a new multipurpose room, and the renovation of the existing pre-school room to make it a more flexible space.

?I think the role of all of us sitting around this table is to look after the needs of the community,? said Councillor Michael Thompson who put the motion forward, seconded by Councillor Harold Kim. ?We all have different perspectives on that definition, but from my perspective the gym is long-needed. It has been identified in our Parks & Recreation Master Plan, it is something that has been discussed for well over five years. I would have wanted to see [adding a gym] sooner rather than later, there is a defined need, it has been discussed, it has been agreed upon that the need is there, and we are just meeting the needs of the community by building a gym.?

The need for the gym was not a matter for debate; rather, the process to get there was in sharp focus at last week's meeting.

Reiterating his previously-stated opposition to the build, Councillor John Gallo said he not only wanted more time to ?digest? the budget figures, but he questioned the input of local sports groups in the overall plan. He questioned the decision to take showers and bleachers out of the build, following consultation with the groups, in order to save on the gym, and said a better process could have been followed.

?When we go to the user groups to get their input? how do we vet the information that is coming before us?? Councillor Gallo asked. ?It's quite easy for a user group to tell us they have 1,000 members and whatever, and 60 ? 70 per cent are Aurora residents and then we go out and spend millions on capital projects because they tell us the need is there. It is just not the way you build these things.?

Councillor Wendy Gaertner shared similar concerns over the showers and said the lack of such facilities could cause a problem down the road. A bigger concern to her, however, was the fact the Town will be spending more than \$11 million on a single gym when the Master Plan says two are needed to meet current and future demand.

?At the end of the day what you really need is two gyms,? she said. ?This is a lot of money to spend on one gym. I want to support sports tourism, we want to make sure we have enough facilities for our future residents, and undoubtedly we need two gyms. I know that we don't have a spot at the moment for two gyms, but I think this money would be better not spent until we can figure this out and hopefully get one gym on top of another as places have done [and] would need a smaller footprint. I won't be able to vote for this.?

Council had previously considered two gyms for the SARC site, but settled for one.

Moving forward with two would have encroached on nearby environmentally-sensitive land, a problem that was deemed difficult to overcome.

Council also expressed some concern that two gyms would run upwards of \$26 million.

?It was really an impossible go for two gyms because of the environmental concerns and I don't know how much money would have been spent trying to remediate that footprint,? Councillor Gaertner added. ?It still remains to me that this is too much money for a gym in this area.?

Speaking in favour of the new SARC gym, Mayor Tom Mrakas said it was time to act as costs are going up.

?We have seen costs escalate every time [Council decides to wait] on a project,? he said. ?We have seen in other communities what happens when they delay. It was originally a \$2 million gymnasium [when first proposed for the SARC} and that has inflated to \$11 million. We are in a deficit through our Parks & Rec Master Plan and if we continue to wait all that is going to happen is prices are going to escalate and that doesn't help our residents and that doesn't help the taxpayers of this community.

?Our job is to make sure we provide the proper services for our community at the best possible price. By waiting, we're not getting the best possible price. Our residents and taxpayers are going to pay even more [for] the exact same service.?

Councillors Gaertner and Gallo were ultimately the two votes against building the new gym.

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