

Cultural Centre aims to 'IGNITE' the community in Pan Am leadup

By Brock Weir

As most of the world turns their attention to Sochi, Russia this week for the opening of the Olympic Winter Games this Saturday, eyes at the Aurora Cultural Centre are also focused on international sport - but a little bit closer to home.

This Family Day, February 17, the Cultural Centre will roll out their first event in a year-long lead-up to the 2015 Toronto Pan-Am/Parapan Games, as a community partner in extensive festivities.

The Centre was recently selected as a partner in the TO2015 IGNITE program.

The IGNITE program encourages grassroots involvement in the PAN-AM games to provide sports, recreation, and cultural groups with support for 'Games-themed initiatives' in their own communities from a new soccer league to parasport programs.

'This is a view to exciting communities around the GTA and beyond about the people, sport, and cultures of the participating nations of the Pan American games,' said Laura Schembri, Executive Director of the Aurora Cultural Centre. 'These games will be the largest, multi-sport event in Canadian History. They will welcome over 10,000 athletes, coaches and officials over the summer of 2015.'

'The Centre will 'IGNITE' our Family Day celebration this year with a free Family Day Fiesta. The main event will be a demonstration of Brazilian martial arts and art forms. Other activities will include a musical demonstration and art project. This will be just one of the first of a number of IGNITE celebrations and partnerships planned by the Centre in the coming years.'

This partnership with such a large event is one of many outreach initiatives planned at the Cultural Centre in the year ahead as they focus both on growth and outreach.

As The Auroran reported last week, Council is set to approve a \$7,000 increase in the Centre's funding this month, bringing their total requisition from municipal funds up to \$377,000.

Numbers were presented to Councillors last week by Frank Pulumbarit, President of the Aurora Cultural Centre Board, and Ms. Schembri. For them, it wasn't just about reach out but building on the success of 2015.

'We have set a target of increasing our own earned revenue by 21.3 per cent,' said Mr. Pulumbarit, noting their requested seven per cent increase equated to a 1.89 overall budget increase to the Centre.

While he projects revenue will increase overall by 8.7 per cent this calendar year, coupled with a drive to hit \$42,000 in earned revenue, additional pressures include a 14.5 per cent growth in personnel costs, an overall increase in salaries and benefits, an increase to reserves, and more of a focus on investing in marketing and programming.

In building on their success, it is a success which was slow to come last year. In 2013, the Aurora Cultural Centre welcomed over 25,000 visits, a 'great year' for them, but in a year which saw a downturn of 18 per cent in the first quarter.

When asked by Mayor Geoffrey Dawe what they could attribute the brief downturn, Mr. Pulumbarit chalked it up to the 'finite' space at the building, but also 'uncertainty surrounding the Centre with respect to its deal.'

This uncertainty surrounded the future of Aurora's Cultural Services Agreement with the Centre. After over a year of negotiations over a new deal which would provide increased transparency on the operations of the Centre, as well as giving the municipality a stronger voice at the table, Mr. Pulumbarit and Mayor Dawe inked the new deal early last year.

?In the subsequent three quarters, Laura and her team killed it,? said Mr. Pulumbarit. ?They brought in more and more people which suggests to me that if that other quarter was somewhere where we wanted it to be, we would have actually surpassed that.?

Looking back over 2013, one of the keys to the Centre's success was an increased emphasis on music, something which they hope to continue this year. At the beginning, they said they weren't sure how such concerts were going to do, but they have since become an ?anchor? in their programming and there is more to come.

?We have five goals for this period of time,? concluded Mr. Pulumbarit. ?The first one is to deliver great programming that is related to arts, culture, and heritage. I want that programming to be diverse, accessible, and appealing to a growing audience.

?Number two is [growth] due to great partnerships and relationships with stakeholders. Number three is to ensure we are securing sufficient resources to achieve the goals in the plan and in order to contribute more fully to the wellbeing of our community. Number four is to be a respected role model for the type of organization we are across many stakeholder groups. Number five is to be recognized as a vibrant and accessible centre of activity within Town and outside of Town.?

This recognition, it seems is coming the Centre's way. Before wrapping programming for the year in advance of the Christmas holidays, the Centre formally announced their second grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Although they plan to host the formal cheque presentation later this month with MPP Frank Klees, they have already earmarked the \$172,000 grant over 35 months to hire a fund development to ?diversify revenues and increase arts and culture programming in Aurora.?