

Fees should be adjusted to get youth more active, say Councillors

By Brock Weir

User fees should be lowered at local recreation centres to encourage kids to get more active, according to Councillors.

Ahead of 2017 Budget Talks, which got underway Saturday morning at Town Hall, Council members had an early discussion on changes to various fees currently paid by Aurora residents for Town services, including recreation programs and gym memberships.

“The annual review of the Fees and Charges Bylaw allows staff the opportunity to ensure that the Town is recovering the cost of user pay services and make changes, if required,” said Town Treasurer Dan Elliott. “Most of the changes are as a result of a minimum 2.1 per cent increase to reflect the impact of inflation on the costs of service delivery. These inflationary increases are necessary in order to maintain the desired applicable service cost recovery benchmarks.”

As far as recreation programs go, the new bylaw splits off youth activities to maintain existing fees for youth-related activities and boosting drop-in activities, but some questioned whether maintaining the status quo is enough for the year ahead.

“At the SARC (Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex) [Al Downey, Director of Parks and Recreation] has put in some really good basketball drop-ins, but what I have noticed is they are not very well-used in the summer,” said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. “One of the main age groups where physical activity falls off is teenagers and I am wondering maybe during the summer months [if] we could have a reduced rate and communications to bring out the teenagers. [It's the summer] and a lot of people are away, but at the same time try to fill those two months in the summer.”

“At the fitness centre, I am often there in the evening or on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon and it is very quiet. I am wondering if we could look at providing incentives to the 14 to 19 year old age group in keeping with the Mayor's attempt to Activate Aurora.” Mr. Elliott said these comments could have been addressed that evening or brought up once again when the Budget Committee starts tackling the budget. While Council ultimately agreed to postpone the conversation until budget time, Councillor Gaertner was not alone in her concerns.

“Just the other day there were a couple of young kids skateboarding,” said Councillor Sandra Humfries. “How can they join the fitness club they couldn't afford? It might be a really good idea to think about how we can do that, especially in the winter months when kids are not doing their hockey or other sports.”

“There is an opportunity for them to get into the gym.”

Among the other issues raised by Councillors ahead of budget talks is an estimated \$400,000 line item to replace the artificial turf field at Sheppard's Bush due to wear and tear. Originally intended to last for 15 years, this one has only lasted 10 and Councillor Gaertner questioned whether field fees relate to recovering costs on the replacement.

“When we originally brought the turf field to Sheppard's Bush, it was a grass field,” said Mr. Downey. “When we converted it to turf, we charged the same fee to our regular use groups as if it was a grass field. The reason for that is if we charged a higher rate, we were concerned that they would continue to migrate to our grass fields, which was the reason we were trying to get them off the grass fields and onto the turf. We didn't want to put a cost barrier on that field. However, that was during the regular season. During the off-season, the rate goes up substantially.”

“If you are a non-resident and you want to use it in the off season, it is substantially more than if you are a resident, non-profit group. The fees do not relate to a replacement of the turf.”