

Hungry kids ? and adults ? get healthy options at local rec centres



By Brock Weir

Whether you've just finished a few lengths in the pool, perfected a half-pipe, or wrapped up your cardio routine on the treadmill, chances are you've worked up a good, healthy appetite, but now there are healthier options available at local recreation centres to satisfy your hunger pangs.

Aurora launched its Power Boost menu last week, an initiative of the Healthy Kids Community Challenge's 'Choose to Boost Veggies and Fruit' initiative.

Developed in conjunction with the Town of Aurora, the Power Boost menu will give users of the Aurora Family Leisure Complex fresh and healthy alternatives to the standard Pepsi, candy and chips, including veggies and dip, hummus and crackers, fruit smoothies, yogurt and granola cafes, and even whole fruit.

A pilot project, the menu will be available to patrons of all ages through October.

'We did a survey a couple of years ago asking the community how they felt about the food options at recreation centres and we had a large response saying they would love to see more healthy options and it made sense to have that in a kind of space where kids are doing physical activities and coming in and out,' says Kathleen Koh, Program Coordinator for the Healthy Kids Community Challenge.

'We're trying to encourage kids to eat more veggies and fruit every day with all their meals and snacks. Working with the Town, it just made sense. It is a hub of activity, families are always coming and going, and it is a great place to foster healthy behaviours. We have done a lot of work with the schools, so it is nice to have a community setting to try something like this and have a pilot highlighting healthy options.'

The Healthy Kids Community Challenge is a multi-year multi-municipality program administered locally by Windfall Ecology Centre.

Since its launch, the program has gone through three phases, the first being 'Run, Jump and Play' focusing on physical activity, the second centred on promoting water as vital to health and an alternative to sugary drinks, and currently veggies and fruit.

Over the last several months, the Healthy Kids Community Challenge has taken their programs out into the community, particularly at schools where they have helped them launch school nutrition programs and provide support for their continuation. They have also spearheaded programming around fruits and veggies to make them a little bit more exciting to younger Aurorans.

'When you present it in a fun and colourful way, it is engaging and they don't think of fruit and veggies as a chore,' says Ms. Koh. 'Kids are really open to being healthy and it is just a matter of giving them those opportunities.'

Enter: Power Boost.

The development of the Power Boost menu was very much a collaborative process, she says, which included an assist from York Region Public Health and the food service company providing snack services at the municipal building. Working together, they developed a process of looking at what menu options worked in other communities, hammered out what might be popular, and devised some variety.

‘We wanted to start off with a few items and not have it be too overwhelming, so it was a matter of narrowing down not only what was most popular, but what was feasible for the snack stand space in terms of what they have to prepare and making sure all those options are fresh and healthy,’ says Ms. Koh.

The menu received the thumbs-up from Mayor Geoff Dawe at Wednesday's launch, who said he was ‘pleased’ that the Healthy Kids Community Challenge has helped bring these options ‘front and centre to let people know there are options in terms of non-sugary drinks and non-sugary snacks.’

He also gave a shout-out to Sport Aurora who have been long-time proponents for a move such as this. In fact, they delegated to Council over a year ago to take matters one-step further by eliminating all sugary drinks and snacks entirely from recreation spaces. Although that is still a ways away, if at all, former Sport Aurora president Ron Weese hailed the Power Boost menu as ‘a step in the right direction.’

‘I am really thankful to the Town and the Healthy Kids Community Challenge for taking this step,’ said Mr. Weese in his Activate Aurora capacity. ‘Our group is more interested in doing the physical activity side of advocacy, but as many people realise you can't solve one problem with one solution; there are multiple solutions and this is one of those solutions about providing a healthy environment.’