

New gym for SARC moves forward in Capital Budget

A potential new gymnasium for the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex has taken a step forward.

Council concluded its 2020 sitting with the approval of the 2021 Capital Budget, one which includes a new gymnasium for the complex (SARC).

Councillors signalled their support for a new 7,500 square foot gymnasium at the SARC located on Wellington Street East, just west of Leslie Street.

A gymnasium of this nature was originally envisioned as part of the SARC more than 15 years ago, but was subsequently taken out of the project. Now, from the perspective of many Council members, the demand is clear.

Should the project be brought to fruition, it could cost in the neighbourhood of \$5 million, funded in the end by Development Charges (DCs) ? money paid to the Town by incoming developers to account for growth demands on municipal resources. Staff anticipate there will be \$9.5 million in Development Charges coming into municipal coffers by the time the project is done and would be financed by debt financing until that time.

From the perspective of Councillor Michael Thompson, who put the potential SARC gym back on Council's radar, the potential price tag was a good reason for moving forward now.

?I think the SARC, in my view, has always needed a gymnasium,? he said. ?I think it is incomplete. The challenge is, of course, year after year we have seen the price tag escalate. I don't know what the price was for a gymnasium when they built the SARC, I assume it was around \$1 million or so, but when we added the gymnasium to the Aurora Family Leisure Complex (AFLC) that was a \$3 million price tag and now, as you can see, it is up around \$5+ million depending on what you want to do.?

The SARC is not the only sport-related project that is being mulled by Council.

As The Auroran has previously reported, an aquatics facility will be subject to further review in the New Year.

Rather than look at these projects in tandem, Councillor Thompson argued that they should be evaluated on their own merits.

?I think we can make a decision on [adding] a gym to this facility and then continue on those conversations around the aquatics facility that may or may not happen there,? he said.

But, looking at the potential SARC gym on its own, size of the potential facility came into sharp focus.

Council agreed that a 5,500 square foot gym wouldn't cut it, instead supporting a high school-sized facility to maximize opportunity for the community.

While a 7,500 square foot facility wouldn't be the competitive-level gym that some groups, such as Storm Volleyball, have wanted, it was deemed the most ?versatile? option.

?I worry a 5,500 square foot size [is investing] in something we really won't get the bang for our buck, or the benefit of use from that gym,? said Councillor Rachel Gilliland. ?If we are going to build something, we can build something that is going to be multi-use for a wide variety of areas.

?I feel it would be much more beneficial to do it right the first time, at least do the 7,500 [square foot] high school gym. It will bring much more flexibility in usage as kids grow in the sport, whether it is through volleyball, basketball, floor hockey? I just feel the

investment now for something that is going to be widely utilized will be much more beneficial for the community down the road.?

Councillor Harold Kim offered a similar perspective, adding: ?I want to have something that will have spillover effects, be it economic or social.?

Reservations, however, were expressed by Councillors Wendy Gaertner and John Gallo, albeit for different reasons.

Although Councillor Gaertner said a gym at the SARC was ?a great idea? and needed, she wanted to make sure the option they chose was the best one for the community as a whole and, to come to that decision, it needed to be looked at hand-in-hand with both the potential aquatics centre and the Town's ongoing Sports Tourism plan.

Councillor Gallo, on the other hand, said he wanted a business case for a new gym before signing off.

?I don't have enough information in front of me to justify any of those, perhaps previous reports or reports that are coming up may do that, but I just don't want to debt finance another capital project. I just can't do that,? he contended, noting the uncertainty in the future.

?While I would love to build as much as we possibly can for the community, I just don't feel comfortable doing any of this right now. I don't know what six months, one year from now is going to look like. If all of you do, you know far more than what I know. What I hear is the start of something very serious financially. I am being cautious. I hear all the arguments and I don't necessarily disagree with them. I am a proponent of sports and [I'd] love to see a facility there. While we may think that things will cost more and perhaps it will, my view is to be cautious right now. To suggest we're not going to spend any money, even if we just approve a capital budget, I think is somewhat naïve. I have been through this many times.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter