

New gym set for SARC after Council rethink

Construction on a new gymnasium at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex (SARC) is set to proceed following a Council u-turn last week.

In June, while sitting at the Committee level, Council voted down the long-in-the-works project citing a significant rise in costs.

The current price-tag of approximately \$14 million is nearly double the budget approved by the 2018-2022 Council with staff citing current ?volatile? market conditions in the price increase.

?A few examples of recreation projects in Ontario have resulted in the tender price for the projects coming in anywhere from 16 per cent to 38 per cent higher than the project budgeted,? said Robin McDougall, Director of Community Services, in a report to Council that aimed to answer some questions outstanding from the June 6 General Committee meeting. ?Council asked if we could pull out the supplementary spaces to save some costs, however, the tender was a lump sum based on the Town's and the contract terms and conditions. If Council wishes to reduce the scope, we will need to re-tender the project.

?Issuing a second tender is a significant risk as any changes would require time and money to revise the design, with no guarantee of any cost savings. In fact, we could get into a position with higher costs with fewer amenities. There is also a possibility we would need to go through another pre-qualification exercise.?

The information provided by McDougall helped address lingering doubts on the part of some Council members, with the vote to proceed as initially envisioned moving ahead 4 ? 2 with Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner and Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo voting against moving ahead. Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim was unable to join the meeting remotely due to technical issues but signalled his support as well.

?There has been lots of discussion over the years on the need for the gym,? said Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, a long-time supporter of adding a gym to the SARC, stating the gym was a need for today rather than a want for tomorrow. ?Staff have demonstrated that if we build it the gym will be well-utilized by community groups, individuals, and for further Town programming. While I share my colleagues' disappointment in the rapid escalation of the cost of the gym, it is a reality we are seeing across the board. Similarly, increases have been noted and shared involving many municipalities in similar projects with substantive increases to their overall budgets.?

Addressing how costs will be covered by Development Charges (DCs) ? what developers pay to the municipality to account for growth and its impact on community services ? Councillor Thompson added municipalities shouldn't wait until population growth happens to address the needs it will bring.

Looking at the financials, Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese said trends reported by other municipalities beyond Aurora were ?disturbing? but were ?just a reality of our economics now.?

?Cost projections have skyrocketed and leave us all concerned whether facilities should be built at all in this volatile environment,? he said. ?I like what Councillor Thompson said about building things in advance or planning them in advance of needs because in the past we have been pretty woeful in waiting for things and waiting for five years and residents have been without the services that we find important.

?I am satisfied that the needs of this facility, for its recreation and purposes, and while it doesn't tick off all the boxes and is undeniably more expensive than was projected, I think the delays will make this even less affordable in the future but it certainly won't make it less important.?

Also reviewing her initial vote was Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland who said the most recent report filled in a ?lot of missing

gaps.?

?The cost of this gym, to me, is still gobsmacking and I'm still really angry and mad about it,? she said. ?In your supplementary information you did express how other municipalities have been facing all this and it is just really hard to stomach, if I am quite honest and it is really disappointing the taxpayer has to supplement that.?

Concluding the discussion, Mayor Tom Mrakas said communities like Aurora ?always need to be looking to the future? and making sure ?[we're] building for the needs of our community for the future today because we have to, otherwise we're going to keep falling behind and our community is going to be left without the services that are much-needed and much-expected as well.?

?We have done a phenomenal job investing in our community and we need to keep investing,? he said. ?It is not a this or that, this is needed. We identified the need through the Parks & Rec Master Plan. It doesn't mean that we end here; it means we continue after this one to look at how we continue to expand, how we continue to invest in our community.

?This is not necessarily being built for our sports organizations; it's not focused on that. It's more focused on our community and our residents being able to utilize it. I think about residents trying to play pickup basketball. It's very difficult for someone in our community to go and play pickup basketball. We're building this not only for sports organizations to be able to utilize it through practices or some training? possibly dry land training, but also for our residents that just want to come and use facilities in our community and that is what we're supposed to be developing and investing in. I think all of us are a little bit annoyed with the cost increase but as Councillor Thompson mentioned, it is the reality that we're facing today. If we delay or we don't do it and we say let's do it a bit later down the road it is just going to cost us more.?

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