

Renovations underway at Complex as project gets approval

By Brock Weir

Construction is now underway on extensive renovations at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex (AFLC).

Councillors signed off on the renos, which will include a community space for youth, last week after lengthy discussions on the merits of the proposal.

For supporters of the project, it is the end of a 13-year journey since a youth centre was first identified for young Aurorans.

It's near the end of a lengthy journey for Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, which began in 2000 with Aurora hiring a youth coordinator to foster and develop programming. As youth programming has grown in Aurora, the Town has never had a youth centre and that was an issue which they hoped to remedy.

Youth programming grew over the years to be spread out over 19 different facilities. Once the new space is completed at the AFLC, it will bring the bulk of programming under one roof.

‘We explored every avenue to Council,’ said Mr. Downey of the 2010 approved Parks and Recreation Master Plan which, in turn, spurred a youth needs analysis identifying a youth centre. ‘Council identified an option to move forward and that option was an addition to the Complex.

‘We soon discovered into the design we had some concerns with the Aurora Family Leisure Complex and that there needed to be some modifications made for a number of reasons. We presented those concerns to Council in July and also identified the need for additional funding to address those issues.’

The process to get to this point has struck a chord with Councillor Michael Thompson, who countered any arguments against the youth space by saying the need for it becomes clearer with each debate.

‘Mr. Downey has continued to demonstrate there is a current need to address some of the issues, but we also have a future need [with a growing population] and that is part of the reason for the renovations as well,’ he said. ‘We know the Town continues to grow and we need to build for the future and take steps to ensure we have that space, so we’re not reactive, but proactive.’

Although he wasn't initially in favour of the slated location for the youth space at the AFLC, Councillor John Abel said he has since come around to the idea. Part of the appeal, he said, was its proximity to the Aurora Community Arboretum and the potential it has to become a ‘very central part of community life’ for those living east of Bayview Avenue.

‘It is going to be that connectivity in the future that our children are going to connect with parts of Aurora,’ he said.

Councillor Abel also said the plans for the Complex compare well to other youth centres he has seen, including one in an unnamed municipality where it was little more than a small room with a TV and stereo.

‘To get in there, you had to walk past teenagers and young people with tattoos and skateboards and dyed hair. If I had my children, I wouldn't figure that would be too inclusive,’ he said, before extolling the virtues of a multipurpose facility in Ingersoll. ‘Their Council voted unanimously, had no [Development Charges] and spent a full even per cent on their operating budget every year on making this youth centre work. To be efficient, we’re going to be bringing in programming that exists there now and bring in youth programming under one umbrella.

‘I can't help but think this is going to be one of the best things to happen in this community in a long, long time. It is long overdue.’

Underscoring much of the discussion over the AFLC renovations over the past two weeks has been the ‘inconvenience’ that will be experienced by some users over the next year as extensive renovations will be carried out. Although the ice pads and squash courts

will remain open, all other programs and activities will be accommodated at the SARC.

"I feel bad for the inconvenience of the people who were using this facility," said Councillor Sandra Humfryes. "Obviously they love it and it was something they counted on. Hopefully, when you get back to the facility in less than 12 months, you will enjoy an improved opportunity there for the fitness centre.

"Overall, having a place for youth to belong and feel a part of their own place is really important in any community. It will also allow our youth to evolve in our own town and perhaps see them here as they grow and become accomplished individuals."

Near the end of the debate, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe weighed in on the discussion. Supporting the youth space, he cited the contract to be awarded coming in less than the previously earmarked \$7.4 million and rejecting concerns voiced by other Councillors that Aurora's reserve funds are not in good enough shape to finance the build.

"Every business I know of factors their business plan on revenue we plan to be receiving," said Mayor Dawe of development charges slated to flow into Town coffers over the next year or two. "I am really not sure why we can't factor in the fact we're going to get these DCs. If there was a fire at the Leisure Complex and we couldn't use it, everybody would be thanking Mr. Downey [as] a hero for organizing all this stuff. Now, unfortunately, he is the goat and that is just unfair."