

Sponsorship opportunities could open for local recreation facilities

By Brock Weir

Local businesses have had their names emblazoned on areas and pools for years, sponsorship opportunities that not only give the Town an infusion of cash, but a chance for businesses to increase their community profiles as well.

But those sponsorship opportunities could soon extend far beyond arenas and pools ? within reason, according to Council.

This week, Council will consider a staff recommendation to implement an enhanced recreation facility and sponsorship programs which could open up the naming and/or advertising rights to dozens of municipal recreation facilities.

?Research of other Ontario municipalities has helped identify a variety of additional indoor and outdoor opportunities to increase advertising and sponsorship revenues,? said John Firman, Manager of Business Support, for the Town of Aurora, in his report to Council. ?Staff met with numerous existing and potential advertising and sponsorship clients, as well as representatives of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce and Welcome Wagon, and industry professionals, to obtain insights into how these programs can best be suited to support local businesses. Staff also consulted with the Town's Economic Development Officer.?

Their findings could result in discounts for new and first-time advertisers securing advertising space in media such as rink boards and in-facility electronic screens for a period of time to reach new and wider audiences and broaden the number of sponsorship opportunities to baseball diamonds, soccer fields, dog parks, splash pads, tennis courts, skateboard parks, picnic shelters and gazebos, trail system signage, the Town Park band shell and playgrounds.

While members of Council welcomed additional revenue opportunities when the report was presented to them at the Committee level last week, some wondered whether the potential sponsorship opportunities went a few steps too far.

?I think Aurora has definitely been moving in the right direction with respect to advertising and sponsorship revenue,? said Councillor Jeff Thom, who got the ball rolling on expanding advertising opportunities last year through a Council motion. ?I think it is a great source of revenue for the Town and I am pleased to see there will be a more engaged?and professional approach to facility sponsorship and advertising. Certainly it is an improvement on what's happening now, even though we're doing better, and I think that report bears that out as well in terms of the increased revenue. I am in favour of this and I do appreciate Robin's work in this regard.?

From the standpoint of Councillor Wendy Gaertner, however, there could be too much of a good thing.

?I strongly object under the sponsorship enhancements recommendation to expand sponsorship assets to include outdoor rec facilities,? she said. ?I am okay with baseball diamonds and soccer fields, not sure about the dog park, but a definite no to the splash pads, the picnic shelters, gazebos, the trail system signage, the playgrounds. I really do not want to turn those public spaces into an advertising opportunity.

?we need to take into consideration the user experience. All of these people pay taxes, do they really want to go to a playground and see advertising? With respect to the baseball diamonds, the actual facilities, to me that is something else. We have been advertising in the hockey arena for a long time. To me, that seems to be part of the established way of doing things, but really, do I want to go for a walk on the trail system and see an advertising sign??

This was a sentiment shared by Mayor Geoff Dawe who said while he ?appreciates? the Town is always looking for ways to increase revenues, it can go too far.

?I think there has also been a lot of ?can we look at the concepts of advertising in the splash pads, the skateboard park, the picnic shelters, trail signs'? I think some things should be sacrosanct and I really wouldn't want to see advertising in the splash pad, for example,? he said.

Councillor Michael Thompson, on the other hand, expressed concerns over a potential cost-break for first time advertisers, keeping in mind some businesses have already been advertising on rink boards for five years or more.

?Here's a scenario where you have a long-standing business that has advertised for many, many years,? he said. ?A competitor comes into Town and you give the competitor six months free advertising. How would that long-standing business receive that?

Maybe give some more thought around who that new business is and whether or not we have existing advertising in those places that may or may not be viewed as competition. If I'm a long-standing business and I have a 10 year relationship year after year, maybe I am okay with it, but maybe I'm not.?