

Sugary drinks should be phased out of vending machines: Activate Aurora



By Brock Weir

Sugary drinks should be removed from all vending machines in municipal facilities, according to Activate Aurora. The advocacy group, which aims to turn Aurora into "Canada's most active community" by 2020 says these "sugar dispensers" should be removed from places like the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex (SARC), Aurora Community Centre, and even Town Hall, to get Aurora on the road to that goal.

"I call these things 'sugar dispensers' because that is what they are," said Ron Weese, Chair of Activate Aurora.

Mr. Weese made his comments at Council last week where he asked local lawmakers to consider a ban.

The move came on the heels of a conference of students, teachers, and other groups in Aurora on November 3 entitled "Water Does Wonders."

Hosted at Dinardo's by Windfall Ecology Centre, the forum brought together over 100 people to talk about the benefits of drinking water while underscoring the importance of water in the up-and-coming generation.

"Our messaging has to be that [water] is a good thing provided often and everywhere, messaging that we value hydration with our safe, clean drinking water supply and that we're interested in using fillable containers so we don't have the environmental impacts of plastic," said Mr. Weese. "We have a number of vending machines all over the SARC and we have them elsewhere. What I am interested in doing is opening up some dialogue here about the discouragement and removal of certain things that are not appropriate for our community from a health perspective.

"I am hoping we can remove vending machines that provide environmentally unfriendly food and beverage."

But, that is just step number one. The more difficult task, he said, was creating an overall policy that "discourages unhealthy choices" across Town. To achieve that, Mr. Weese offered four proposals:

"I think we should be reviewing the existing contracts we do have and if we can remove some of these vending machines that would be great," said Mr. Weese, alluding to current vending machine contracts the Town of Aurora already has in place with companies, including Pepsi. "Any vending machine contracts we have that have a term " because we believe in honest involvement and business with people " [will be allowed to] expire but not renew the contracts, and then create a policy that suspends further agreements with vendors that provide the "sugar dispensers" and containers that harm the environment. The bigger, and tougher one is create some policy and the provision of food and beverages in all our facilities that promote healthy consumption."

While the logistics will need to be fine-tuned " and Council referred Mr. Weese's request to staff for further comment " the proposal was warmly received by local lawmakers.

"I think it is absolutely the right direction to go just to keep our community as healthy as possible," said Councillor Sandra Humfries.

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas: "I think it is a great initiative to make these changes and promote healthy eating."

To underscore his point, Councillor Mrakas cited recent suggestions made at the Town's Environmental Advisory Committee calling

on Aurora implementing a ban on bottled water.

“As a Town I think we need to look at ensuring all of our facilities have water stations so everyone has it readily available,” he concluded. “We need to make sure all the schools have that before we actually do anything at this level.”

From the perspective of Councillor John Abel, by going in this direction, Aurora would be following in the footsteps of other communities across the country and around the world that have implemented similar initiatives to promote “healthy living.”

“We grew up with no vending machines anywhere, basically,” said Councillor Abel. “Things have really changed and we can take a lead by not being a part of it.”

Mayor Geoff Dawe, however said he saw an “interesting contradiction” in the proposal.

“I [rarely drink] pop, so I would have absolutely no problem with vending machines not selling that, but how do you ban that and then justify selling coffee to someone who fills it full of sugar?” he pondered. “To me, that is a bit of a double standard.”

In response, Mr. Weese said he is “guided by the compass not the car.”

“I want the sugary beverages gone,” he said. “We know what the concentration of sugars should be in order to get proper hydration. We know the problem with too much sugar. I think the other question that has been discussed both at the snack bar has to do with some policies around healthy eating.

“No one likes that R word “regulation” but look at what regulation has done: it has given us seatbelts, it has given us recycling, put smoking where it belongs, which is outside and somewhere else. You can't smoke in a car with children? The regulation is not something we like to do, but it is effective in certain areas.”