

Community to benefit from Salvation Army deal

By Brock Weir

It has been over three years since its ceremonial ground-breaking, but the Salvation Army's new headquarters for Central York Region is set to take a significant step forward this month and the Aurora community could reap the rewards.

The Salvation Army of York Region's Northridge Community Church has long-planned a move from their current Newmarket headquarters to land they have acquired on Leslie Street, just north of Wellington Street East, but after a deal to sell their current location fell through the project was put on the backburner.

Now that that has been sorted out, it is full steam ahead on their Aurora relocation, or it will be with some help from Council.

Council has approved a request from the Salvation Army to defer the development's customary Cash In Lieu of Parkland fees, monies collected by the municipality to preserve and acquire park and greenspace for the community as a whole under a unique deal with the organization.

"Our hope is that through further discussions with [the Salvation Army's] Major Brian Bishop we will be able to arrive at a partnership or some partnerships where we can use some parts of the facility at times and enjoy the benefits for the whole community," said Aurora CAO Neil Garbe at Council last week. "We have done arrangements like this before and we are optimistic this will be a real plus for our community."

The Salvation Army plans a two-phase construction on the site adjacent to the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex (SARC), complete with worship space, trails, and a full size gymnasium. According to Major Bishop, the Salvation Army plans on tackling the gym component as part of the first phase to help meet the needs of the community at large.

"We recognize that as Aurora continues to grow and Central York Region continues to grow, we want to be prepared for that growth," said Major Bishop.

"We don't want to be reactive, we want to be proactive. Hence our reason for buying this property back in 2006. We have had tremendous privilege as we have come alongside and journeyed with people of seeing things other people don't; these hidden, prevalent, and emerging needs. It is a privilege we take very seriously and through those relationships with these people we have come to understand what some of those future needs are going to be.

"The facility is taking into consideration and understanding that it will be a facility that will be able to accommodate the diversity of those emerging needs. We are endeavouring to position ourselves to be that pervasive presence in the community by bridging that gap and providing key social services. As much as the Town of Aurora is growing, so are the needs growing with the Town of Aurora."

This journey, he said, will be aided by a 22,000 square foot facility on Leslie Street that will include not only the gym but the auditorium and worship space at a later date. The decision to phase things in gym-first was made "in an endeavour to be able to support the Town of Aurora to the best of our ability."

"[There was] the feeling we can support the Town greater with a gymnasium than we can with a worship space, as much as it is going to be multifunctional and purposeful as well," said Major Bishop. "It is my understanding that the value of such parkland fees is to ensure the Town provides adequate green space for parks, either through the acquisition of, or for other public recreation purposes. It is to ensure the value of recreational lands to help foster leisure activity and exercise, family engagement and pleasant surroundings. Although this facility and the balance of the 5.27 acres will be owned and operated by the Salvation Army, it is very much a facility geared to support the values of our larger community."

Between 25 and 30 per cent of the property, he noted, will remain undeveloped, to be designated for walkways and trails, while a

pond on the land will be preserved. Although it is not parkland as such, their plans fill that purpose, he added.

The Salvation Army told Council last week they were unaware building permits were contingent on these parkland fees being paid, something they did not consider when providing their capital budget to their national office. Not receiving this deferral from Council could ?seriously delay? the project, said Major Bishop.

Their request, however, was warmly received around the table, with Council approving a deferral of their cash-in-lieu payments pending a further staff report, allowing the plans to move forward.