

Say goodbye to plastic water bottles at vending machines ? if Council gets its way

By Brock Weir

Efforts to transform Aurora's concession stands into hubs of 'Real Food' and healthy eating took an environmental twist last week with Council opting to phase out plastic water bottles from the counters and vending machines.

Council this week is set to approve a plan which will require all companies looking for a chance to operate vending machines and concession stands at municipal facilities to stock a minimum of 55 per cent healthy eating options.

In addition to the mandatory requirement for 55 per cent healthy food options is the elimination of plain bottled water at the point of sale, with exceptions for bottled carbonated and flavoured water, and a provision that empty refillable bottles can be made available for sale.

The move came after a campaign led by parents and teens in the community under the banner of 'Real Food First,' a name so-chosen, explained parent Kasie Savage, to illustrate they define 'real food' as food having real nutritional value, which garnered the support of over 700 community members.

'We have to give thanks for a grassroots organization coming forward,' said Councillor John Abel at last week's General Committee meeting. 'I have always said one of our best assets is our community and this demonstrates exactly that ? getting involved with your community and listening to them and then bringing it forward to Council for consideration. This is truly a great example of what good work and conscientious engagement does.'

While Councillor Abel made unsuccessful efforts to amend the RFP to include a reduction in the sheer number of vending machines now in place at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex, he supported the provision to address the plastic water bottle issue.

'In Norway, they have effectively eliminated the disposing of plastic water bottles,' he said. 'I am wondering if, in our RFP (Request for Proposal) we can explore where a deposit is required on bottled water and, when you're finished, you put [the bottle] back into the machine and it gives you your deposit?' They are able to recycle the bottles four to eight times. It's a great way to reduce plastic and it might be a great initiative.'

Although this option didn't gain traction the first time around ? and could be brought up again by the time Council moves to ratify the RFP this week ? this was part of the general trend taking aim at the plastic problem.

'I would like to see the elimination of plastic water bottles in general,' said Councillor Jeff Thom. 'I was down at an event in Niagara Falls?and they had a big sign over their concession that their whole municipality has gotten rid of plastic bottles. They had vending machines that had cans of beverages, but they got rid of the plastic. This is a step in the right direction, especially when the Town provides water that is safe, clean, delicious and readily available at filling stations.'

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas: 'This is a good first step in providing healthy options for our residents and children in our community. I am thrilled, from an environmental perspective, of eliminating single use bottled water. I would like to see it go even further but overall this is a great first step.'

Last week's discussion, however, wasn't just a rubber stamp. There were some concerns raised by Council members. In addition to Councillor Abel's contention that the numbers of vending machines at the SARC clutter the building and should be reduced, others wanted to ensure that the tastes of recreation centre users would still be met.

'Let's say that everybody loves Coffee Crisps and despite the fact there is 55 per cent healthy foods, you have a line-up of people on a nightly basis asking for Coffee Crisp,' said Councillor Paul Pirri. 'This wouldn't impede the owner of the concession stand to refill that one item, would it?'

He was assured by Lisa Warth, Acting Parks Director, that the Town could not enforce that particular kind of inventory control. Others, such as Councillor Harold Kim, questioned whether Councillors could approach local companies with that already serve up from a healthy angle, letting them know that this RFP was available.

'We all know that human behaviour takes time to change,' he said. 'Acceptance may take months, if not years, to change, and I don't think healthy eating habits are any different, although I suspect Aurora's adoption might be different because of our sports history and so forth.'

'We all know that proven brands sell,' he said. 'If you have a Starbucks, a Tim Hortons, or Longo's, people have the recognition and know about the quality and types of foods offered. It's an instant success. There is no adoption period and it is not necessarily a money-losing operation.'

But staff said such an approach ? from either a Council or staff member ? would violate existing procurement measures.

'It is a bit of a dangerous slope. If you're simply keeping the conversation to, 'Hey, the Town has an opportunity I would like you to

have a look?' keep it to that, that's fine,? said Town Treasurer Dan Elliott. ?Otherwise you venture into the grey area of lobbying and we have a blackout period. We have to be very careful about that so we don't have disqualify a bidder for lobbying or crossing the blackout period.?