

Sports Dome could come under ownership of Town

By Brock Weir

The Aurora Sports Dome will come under close scrutiny this week as Councillors consider making the first step in bringing the dome under municipal ownership.

Councillors last week approved exploring a concept that would bring the Dome under the ownership of the Town at \$1.1 million, 90 per cent of which would be covered by development charges with the balance from redirecting taxpayer support to the Aurora Youth Soccer Club (AYSC).

The AYSC would then be in charge of the dome's operations.

The development follows a direction made by Council last year to look for ways to amend the current agreement with the current owner of the Sports Dome, Terry Redvers, as well as for ways to recoup taxes and operating costs spent on the otherwise privately held facility.

According to Mr. Downey's report, it was always Aurora's position that the municipality would "facilitate the opportunity" for indoor soccer but wouldn't go as far as building a dome.

At last week's General Committee meeting, however, some Councillors felt they had more questions than answers on the proposal and amended the recommendation giving the green light to "explore" the concept rather than "endorse" it in principle.

Speaking to some concerns, particularly from Councillor Paul Pirri that paying \$1.1 million for a 10-year-old structure with a 25-year lifespan wouldn't be the best investment, Mr. Downey said Council's endorsement of the plan was an important first step in gauging Council's "appetite" for a particular concept.

"We identified in the report some conditions we were trying to achieve which is to ensure there were no taxes being paid by the municipality regardless of who operates the dome," said Mr. Downey. "The AYSC is very interested in being the operator and we would like to know if Council is interested in that."

"All parties seem quite anxious to get this done at some point. I believe we are probably looking at one or two months to make sure we have an opportunity to sit down with the AYSC and hammer out the terms of the agreement so we can come back [to] Council with what we feel is the appropriate value of the dome [and] the terms and conditions we feel address the concerns of the Town, the Operator and the Club."

Councillors nevertheless had mixed views on going forward as presented. Councillor Michael Thompson, for instance, said there were a lot of questions to be answered, namely how the project "morphed" from being one of negotiating new terms of an agreement with Mr. Redvers to one of purchasing the dome itself.

"A paramount [issue] is wanting to ensure that on any town-owned facility and sports facility that there is accessibility to all," he said. "I am not able to endorse the concept because there are too many unanswered questions with regards to other operations, and an accessibility agreement. I want to make sure those provisions that have been placed in the agreement that stands today are cared for."

Although he saw this as an opportunity, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe expressed some caution, describing the Town of Newmarket's controversial plan to provide the Newmarket Soccer Club with a multi-million dollar loan as the "elephant in the room."

"I think there is an opportunity for us to explore another partnership," said Mayor Dawe. "We have a partnership with the Separate School Board, so I think this is an opportunity for us to look at partnership and see how we can engage members of our community."

These kinds of partnerships, however, did not sit well with Councillor Evelyn Buck, who said she was not prepared to endorse the concept. Considering how a proposal for a public private partnership by the Aurora Community Tennis Club for a year-round tennis facility fizzled, going forward in this way could open up the floodgates for other community groups to come forward with similar proposals and it could place the Town in a difficult position.

She also argued against the use of development charges to pay for such a deal, contending it is a cost born by incoming property owners to Aurora and "is not found money."

Councillor Chris Ballard, on the other hand, expressed enthusiasm for going forward with the plan.

"I think it is a unique way of solving a problem for the Town, the AYSC, and I think it needs to be more fully explored. In many ways, that is what we're asking staff to do - come back with answers to a number of very important questions. I am not saying yes to the deal tonight because I don't know what the deal is. I want more information.

"I think of the 4,000 AYSC children who could be impacted if we were to shut the dome down and I don't want to do that. I think we want to make sure the taxpayers are well taken care of and young soccer players in our town are well taken care of."