

Surveys aren't enough for Council to make decision on aquatics centre

More public input is needed before Council can make a decision on a new aquatics facility to serve the community, according to lawmakers.

Last week, while sitting at the Committee level, Council received an update on a feasibility study to determine whether or not Aurora needs a new pool or, looking at the big picture, a standalone aquatics facility to serve as a sports tourism draw.

According to a report from Recreation Manager Lisa Warth, the Town received 109 responses to an online survey designed to be a barometer on whether or not a new facility is warranted.

43 per cent of those who took the survey said they currently use an aquatics facility outside of Aurora, with 30 per cent using pools in Newmarket. 80 per cent of those who filled out the survey indicated that aquatics facilities were very important, with 87 per cent indicating they were between somewhat satisfied and very satisfied with the Town's current aquatics offering.

66 per cent of respondents said they strongly supported new facilities, with just 9 per cent indicating they either opposed or strongly opposed additional swimming spaces.

88 per cent of respondents were Aurora residents.

The Town of Aurora engaged a consultant to carry out an aquatics feasibility study earlier this year and, in addition to the online surveys, have carried out virtual meetings with stakeholders to look at current pool programs and look at the pros and cons of either a 25 metre pool or a 50 metre training or competition pool.

The study also looks at whether or not a new pool could be accommodated at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex or would best serve the community as a standalone facility.

In order to determine the size and type of aquatic facility to build and operate, the Town needs to have further discussion on sport tourism in general, said Ms. Warth, noting the recommendation from staff that the matter be referred to a roundtable meeting specifically discussing sport tourism. With other sport and recreation facilities currently under consideration, including a gymnasium addition to the SARC and other sports field development, the Town needs to determine which facilities to invest in to drive sport tourism.

Investment in sport facilities will also require Council to make a decision on service levels and affordability. The size and type of future facilities will depend on the Town's desire to further sport tourism. A 50-metre pool is not required, nor sustainable for only community use (ie: Learn to swim, leisure swims, water sports, aquatic exercise, training, etc.). A 50-metre pool would only be built if Council wanted to provide a facility for elite athlete training and hosting high-level competitions along with some community use.

The Town will not be successful in the sport tourism realm without suitable facilities. Additionally, the Town may want to explore potential partnerships for the construction and operation of any facility capable of hosting high-level sporting events as there will be a Regional benefit to having these facilities.

But, according to Council members, the survey results presented to them last week were far from convincing in terms of demonstrating a need.

It is the Aurora residents who are going to pay for this, said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. A survey of 109 people, I don't really think that it merits much attention, I am sorry to say. I don't think it is a valid survey, I don't think it really tells us that much.

Councillor Michael Thompson held a similar view.

'It is always good to get that feedback and to share that with Council, but in all honesty, 109 respondents, of which only 88 per cent are Aurora residents?it is less than one per cent of not just the people who voted but significantly less than our taxpayers,' said Councillor Thompson. 'I would be cautious in allowing 100 users to dictate policy and/or influence the decision-making process. Have the information presented to us, but there are some statements in here with regards to 'strong indication of a new facility based on the response of the survey' and that is not really representational of the community.

'The report does put an awful lot of weight on our surveys. I know we struggle with getting engagement from the community, but, as we have seen time after time, I think with our budget survey we only had 89 people respond. We need to figure out a better way to get the community involved in these processes.'

Robin McDougall, Director of Community Services for the Town, contended that the potential aquatics facility would be a matter up for consideration during Council's deliberations on the 2021 Capital Budget, but they were at 'a bit of an impasse' without discussing it in the context of sports tourism.

'It is a big decision and we just didn't want to present a budget and have [the decision] simply based on budget,' she said. 'We felt there was a discussion required around sport tourism and the desire of Council within sport tourism.'

Yet, after nearly two years of a potential new facility being considered, there were a lot of 'ifs' from Councillor Thompson's perspective.

'I am concerned this will be the Library Square of this term and we'll have more meetings and more discussions and the next thing you know it is 2022 and it is too late,' he said. 'I think rather than watching the facility be frozen in place while we continue to debate and discuss this particular issue [it is valuable] to make some nominal gesture about how much money we want to put into the SARC or this capital budget to indicate if there is any desire at all to move forward rather than see another year go by with more discussion and conversation around this.

'Out of that capital discussion I would like to see some indication that this is truly a path Council wants to proceed and is going to allocate either funds or some sort of sign that this is worthwhile to continue pursuing. If not, there may be other things we want to [do] with the SARC. I just don't want to see it frozen in time.'

By Brock Weir
Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter