

## Tigers seek municipal support to get into the black

**By Brock Weir**

The Aurora Tigers' Season Opener is usually a time for celebration for their season opener and while that was the case again on Sunday night, the excitement was tempered with a poignant reminder of the 15th anniversary of 9/11: New York City Fire Fighters on hand for the ceremonial puck drop.

Fire fighters from Station 281 in New York City, which suffered six deaths in the terrorist attack were invited to join members of Central York Fire Services and York Regional Police to kick-off the game at the invitation of team owners Jim and Rita Thomson.

The Thomsons, who bought the Tigers last year, aimed to get over 1,000 people out to Sunday's game, the first in a new pattern of home games moved to Sunday night from the traditional Friday.

The move is intended to fill more seats, make the games the destination they once were and, ultimately, get the team in the black financially once again.

Also key in helping the Tigers out of the red and into the black is a break on ice costs at the Aurora Community Centre, according to Mr. Thomson.

Mr. Thomson made his pitch for a price break to Councillors at last week's General Committee meeting, highlighting the long-standing relationship between the Town and what is now the Aurora Tigers going back in some form or another for well over a century.

"My wife and I bought the Junior A Tigers last July, understanding what we were purchasing: you don't make money at Junior A Hockey," said Mr. Thomson. "It is a business that is very tough to run. We knew that going in. What we wanted to do is make the community more involved, which we feel we have made a big dent in that last year.

"The previous owners had an operating loss in excess of a million dollars over the period of time they owned the team. We went out into the community in a big way with our players. We just really wanted to get the community involved in that; going to local businesses who are very generous to us and giving us sponsorship monies to help run the business and the operating of the Aurora Tigers. We come to you today for help to maybe give us a better ice rate as it is our biggest expense to run the hockey team."

Going into the community, Mr. Thomson says it was their mission to make the Tigers familiar faces in the community, letting players volunteer at numerous community events including last month's Ribfest and last fall's Aurora Sports Hall of Fame induction dinner, giving away an estimated 10,000 free game passes to kids in the Aurora Youth Soccer Club in the anticipation they would bring a ticket-buying parent or two with them and ramping up their social media efforts.

"The Town of Aurora gives us our dressing room and office space, which we are thankful for because there are some teams that have to pay for that," said Mr. Thompson. "There are some teams that are getting breaks on ice, getting their facilities for free like you guys give us, which is great. There are different plans in each Town. I believe out of the 22 teams, 20 lost money and that was with help from the communities and different places. Everybody has got a different situation.

"If you go to a game [in Trenton] they have an average of 800 people. Right now we were averaging 200 before my wife and I bought it and we raised the attendance by 100, which was big for us. We're up to an average of 300. Moving from Friday to Sunday nights, we're hoping we will get up around the 500 average. When we talk about Trenton, you go into their arena, there are whole communities that are in them. The rinks are sold out with advertising. They get breaks from the Town and they are one of the teams that is very successful in our league."

Should Council opt to give them a break on ice costs and Council did vote at the Committee level to look into the matter? Mr. Thomson said the team is prepared to pay full freight once they get back into the black.

?You guys turn the lights on for us, the staff are fantastic and you guys do it right here,? said Mr. Thomson.

A final decision is pending a further report to Council but Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, told Council last week price breaks would result in a reduction of over \$12,300 to the Tigers' yearly cost.

?It is more of a financial issue and whether Council wants to make a commitment to that or not,? said Mr. Downey.

This was a view shared by Councillor Michael Thompson, who said: ?I think, just for us, it is one thing to say lower our ice costs, but usually there is a budgetary figure associated with it. It does help to have some context.?

Councillor John Abel said he was in favour of looking at this from the perspective of getting them into the black in a ?one or two year effort? while Councillor Tom Mrakas said anything the Town can do to provide a little bit of help to bring the Tigers to that end goal is worth exploring.