

Year-long AFLC shutdown to begin this week

By Brock Weir

The doors could be closed and the contractors could be coming into the Aurora Family Leisure Complex (AFLC) as early as this Wednesday to make way for extensive renovations to the rec centre.

The renovations, which will include overhauls of fitness and gym areas, as well as new program spaces for youth, are expected to get final approval by Councillors this week after lengthy debate at the Committee level last Tuesday.

"This is hopefully the conclusion of a 13 year road to get to this point," said Al Downey, Aurora's Parks and Recreation Director, highlighting the work going into what started off as a project for Aurora's new Youth Centre.

The new \$7.5 million plan includes not just overhauls of the existing spaces, but also a new climbing wall for youth, and an outdoor skate park.

Despite numerous studies and reports on the Community Space for Youth or Youth Centre – the name depends on who you ask – Councillors remain at odds over the project.

"We have been waiting far too long for this," said Mayor Geoffrey Dawe on the youth space. "It is 12 years in the making, so I think we are doing what we should be doing for our residents. I was at the Seniors' Centre for lunch on Wednesday and they said, 'We're really looking forward to the changes in the Complex.'"

A more significant step on the barometer, he said, was a lunch later that week with the Able Network, an Aurora-based support group providing work and community opportunities for intellectually challenged adults in the area. Able Network members are also active members of the AFLC's fitness programs and, as such, weighed in on the closure.

"One of the directors said, 'Yes, it is an inconvenience, but we will manage,'" said Mayor Dawe of their thoughts on the impending year-long closures, which will see most of the programming shifted over to the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex for the next year. "An inconvenience? Absolutely. But, I think what we're going to end up with more than outweighs the inconvenience."

Others, however, were not so sure. Councillors Chris Ballard and Evelyn Buck had previously expressed similar viewpoints on the location and the viability of the youth space. Although both were initially against the concept, Councillor Buck said last week she accepted the previous majority decision of Council to move ahead with the project. The same cannot be said for Councillor Ballard.

"For me, there is a fundamental question I still have," he said. "What started out as a Youth Centre and the debate about a Youth Centre has ended up becoming the renovation of the existing Aurora Family Leisure Complex. I have real concerns and I think most members of the Leisure Centre would agree."

"We have heard from many of them who were surprised at what was going to happen because they thought we were talking about an additional building, or an addition to the existing facility. They didn't think – nor did I – that what we were really talking about was an extensive renovation of an existing facility."

Councillor Ballard argued that if a complete overhaul was the intention at the outset that that was something which should have been subject to a standalone debate. The fact they have been rolled into one issue, he added, has left him very "unhappy" with the project. Nevertheless, the majority came down in favour of moving full steam ahead with the plan last week.

"It is long overdue," said Councillor Sandra Humfries. "We need to have a youth centre for our youth to belong. I sometimes find it surprising that we don't see value in spending this money for our future. We want them to have some place to hang out and learn and there are going to be resources available to them that are not available today. I think it is valuable money well spent."

Also coming down in favour of the project was Councillor Paul Pirri. Councillor Pirri has been somewhat of a wildcard in the debate, initially pushing for an alternate location for the Youth Centre in vacant retail space. He has nevertheless come around to the AFLC.

During last week's discussions, however, he squared off with Councillor Wendy Gaertner over differing views on how the AFLC facility will be used.

?For me, I come up with two per cent of this whole project, and all of this money that is going to be spent, is going to be actually dedicated to youth, so I don't know how people around this table keep referring to this as a youth centre,? she said.

Councillor Pirri, on the other hand, said this rests on the time of day in question. While youth are in school, most of the space will be available to other community groups, particularly seniors, and that is preferable to it sitting empty all day until school is out, he argued.

?All of the space that has been identified as program space, as far as activity rooms, as far as the climbing wall and gymnasium, all of that space is going to be priority youth space,? concluded Mr. Downey. ?100 per cent of that space is going to be used by youth. That is our wish.?