

Council grapples with financial cost of keeping city daycare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Last night, during the first of the city's budget deliberations, the mayor requested that Nick Apostle, the Commissioner of Community Services department, direct his staff to find efficiencies in an effort to prevent a two-percent increase within the department's \$10-million budget.

"On \$10-million, I am not convinced you can't find \$215,000," said Mayor Christian Provenzano.

Apostle reminded the mayor the primary reason for the increase.

"I would just like to point out, Mr. Mayor, that particular increase — the majority of it — is in daycare," said Apostle.

Council voted against city staff's recommendation to get out of the business of operating daycare centres during their December 7, 2015 meeting.

In the meantime, an efficiency was found by the department, as a supervisory position within city-run daycare was eliminated by attrition, but it still left the department facing a 2-percent increase to its budget.

A report will be presented during the March 21 council meeting regarding the plan to move city-run daycare operation and staff into schools.

Aside from city-run daycare, the Community Services department also operates the Essar Centre, as well as the W.J. McMeeken Centre, John Rhodes Community Centre and Northern Community Centre.

Ward 6 Councillor Ross Romano questioned ongoing maintenance costs for the McMeeken Centre, which was constructed in 1968.

He wondered if the other arenas in the city could pick up the slack should the McMeeken be shuttered.

"Can we survive, continuing our service levels for the number of hours of hockey time that is necessary, by getting rid of the McMeeken now?" asked Romano.

Apostle said the other arenas in town are operating at about 75 percent capacity for on-ice programs and some would be affected should the facility close.

Although the roof and underfloor piping are in need of replacement an estimated cost of \$3-million, Apostle said the facility is safe to use while the department finalizes its report on plans to repair or replace the arena.

"The longer we wait before we do something there the more chance or risk there is a major problem could occur," said Apostle.

Ward 5 Councillor Marchy Bruni questioned the operational losses of the Essar Centre.

"If this was a private business, losing \$592,000, they wouldn't be in business for a very long time," said Bruni.

Apostle responded by saying such entertainment facilities do not turn profits but the broader economic impact of hosting events such as hockey and curling tournaments can be counted in the millions of dollars.

Frank Fata, councillor for Ward 5, asked if future projects such as the pump track at Esposito Park can be put on hold.

Apostle said funding for the project is allocated to come from a reserve fund and would not appear as a saving in the upcoming budget, but \$8,000 to \$10,000 in maintenance costs would be saved from a delay.

Plans to refurbish the Memorial Tower will go ahead, said Apostle, as the project is under structural review.

The Memorial Tower was built between 1946 and 1949, in honour of Sault and area soldiers who gave their lives fighting for Canada in the First and Second World Wars.

The tower was preserved after the demolition of Memorial Gardens (to which it was originally attached) in 2006 and now stands adjacent to Essar Centre.

A motion by Ward 3 Councillor Matthew Shoemaker, which is seeking a report by staff identifying if some city parks can be sold, will be presented at an upcoming city council meeting.

Shoemaker's motion, should it be passed, would not have an effect on the current budget cycle.

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