

## Council gives green light to new ice arena

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by Peter Bodley

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The Coon Rapids City Council Tuesday unanimously voted to construct the new ice arena on the Coon Rapids Boulevard site to replace the existing ice arena, which is located on Mississippi Boulevard, across from Anoka-Ramsey Community College. Built in the early 1970s, the arena has significant structural and mechanical issues.

In approving the motion to build the new arena, the council did commit to a phased development of a community center on the property south of Coon Rapids Boulevard and west of Crooked Lake Boulevard, which includes the old Target store, a portion of which is currently occupied by Goodwill, and the adjacent retail center, all of which the city purchased last year for more than \$5 million in a lawsuit settlement.

The council directed staff to “develop and present next steps, include budgetary impact and scope/quality of the project” to construct one sheet of ice and the development of the front open space as a new city park built to minimum standards.

Those next steps will include a council work session early in the new year to go over elements of the ice arena, including quality, and the inclusion of a concession area, which had been proposed in the commons area of the adjacent community center.

The proposed 53,960 square-foot ice arena currently carries an estimated price tag of \$9.696 million. Added to that will be some \$700,000 in architectural/engineering fees and an estimated \$8.5 million for land acquisition/site preparation, which includes the \$5-plus million the city has paid for the property.

“The cost is not going to go up,” said Mayor Tim Howe. “I think we will be pleasantly surprised by the bids.”

No additional operational costs on the property tax levy will be required from the new ice arena because those expenditures are already part of the levy, according to information presented to the council by City Manager Matt Fulton.

In the motion, the council eliminated from this phase the reconstruction of 111th Avenue, which is included in the total community center package. The estimated cost of that work is \$431,000.

The council did not vote on a motion to proceed with the entire community center as proposed, which in addition to the ice arena, would have included an aquatics area, gymnasium/fitness, lockers/receiving support, event center/senior center, commons/indoor playground and park improvements/ice trail as well as 111th Avenue reconstruction.

The entire package had an estimated construction total of \$30,829,000, which increased to \$41,641,175 when architectural/engineering fees and land acquisition/site preparation costs were factored in. There would also be additional property tax support required for operational costs, including staffing.

Comments at Tuesday’s meeting were confined to the council.

Howe said public testimony had been taken when the community center project was discussed at the Oct. 20 council

meeting. Over the course of two hours, a large majority of those who spoke Oct. 20 opposed the proposed community center.

Since then, the council has had a series of work sessions in an effort to come to a consensus, including a four-hour marathon at Anoka-Ramsey Community College last month.

The community center issue was brought back for formal action by the council Tuesday after a work session a week earlier when four council members - Paul Johnson, Melissa Larson, Scott Schulte and Joe Sidoti - indicated support for a phased community center approach starting with the ice arena.

That did not change Tuesday. But Howe and Councilmembers Denise Klint and Bruce Sanders all voted for moving forward with the ice arena, although they would have preferred the entire package and feared that the community center would never be built.

Sidoti, who had voted to move ahead with the full community center project in July, said he did so then with misgivings and with several questions that needed answering, including financial commitments from the community college on acquiring the property on which Cook Ice Arena now stands and the reconstruction of 111th to provide a new entrance to the college.

None of those questions has been answered, he said.

In his view, 111th Avenue should not be built until the college makes a commitment. Access to the ice arena can be from Crooked Lake Boulevard, Sidoti said.

While Sidoti supported moving ahead with the ice arena, he said he still had concerns over what he called a "disconnect" between the estimated \$9.6 million to replace Cook Arena with the \$5.5 million it cost to build an ice arena in Rogers.

Like Sidoti, Johnson said the 111th Avenue reconstruction was premature until there were commitments from the college and from the Anoka County Library Board and the Anoka County Board to locate a library in the proposed community center.

The use of Crooked Lake Boulevard in the short term would work as it had done when the Target store was open on the site, he said.

He remained convinced that a phased community center was the correct approach, given today's economy, with the ice arena the first step, Johnson said.

According to Schulte, he was committed to a phased development starting with the ice arena and a park to meet minimum standards.

In moving forward, Schulte said that public/private partnerships had to be created before he would support any aquatics, gymnasium, fitness center components.

"A community center is a great idea because it would bring the community together in a lot of different ways," he said.

"But I look at it as a want, not a need, although we would benefit in the long run."

Schulte did not think now was the right time to build the community center, but the process was not over and would continue through the years, he said.

However, Sanders feared that with the ice arena built, there would never be a good time to do the rest of the project, he said. "I have put a lot of thought into this and believe the community center would benefit all of Coon Rapids," Sanders said.

There was opposition to community centers that have been built in other Twin Cities communities, but they have been successful with varying subsidies from taxpayers and brought vitality to those cities, according to Sanders.

And Sanders said a scientific survey conducted in the city more than two years ago showed support for a community center with a majority willing to pay the increased taxes that went with it, although he said that support might have "softened."

"We shouldn't have to settle for second or third best," he said.

But Sidoti said community centers all lose money and operate in the red.

According to Larson, while there will never be a perfect time to build a community center, there would be a better time than this.

"I can't justify it now, but I do support the ice arena," Larson said.

Howe had come to the conclusion that for the full community center package to work there had to be a partnership between the city and private operators on the aquatics, gymnasium and fitness center components, and he would not support the entire proposal until that occurred, he said.

But Howe said he would have backed another proposal that was discussed by the council, but did not come to a vote Tuesday that would have included the ice arena, community room/senior center, commons space, indoor playground and park.

The senior center is outgrowing its current space at the Coon Rapids Civic Center, he said.

"In my opinion, the timing is right now," Howe said. "Bids will never be this low and our bond rating is good."

Howe did not believe that the council should go to the voters with a referendum on the issue as many residents who opposed the project had sought. "We were elected to do a job and make these decisions," he said.

"We might differ and I have no problem with that. I appreciate all the e-mails and phone calls I have received on the issue."

According to Klint, she has lived in the community for a long time and seen it evolve, but there is always a need to reinvest in the future of the city.

"I'm convinced that the community center project is the right thing to do now given the current bidding climate," Klint said. "If we do it in phases, I don't think it will ever be done."

Klint was saddened by the negativity surrounding the issue based on incomplete facts, she said. "But I want citizens to be involved and I hope they will continue to be involved," Klint said.

While Klint would like to see the "whole thing" built, she said it was time for the council to come together to move the ice arena project forward. "I hope the community does the same," Klint said.

The phased approach provides a better timeline for considering options relating to private partners for the recreational amenities, according to Fulton.

“It would allow for future phases to be accomplished in hopefully better economic times,” Fulton said.

The council also unanimously approved a motion recognizing and acknowledging “the fine work of the community center task force,” which was created by the council to work on the project and “dream,” as Howe put it.

According to Howe, the task force members did as the council asked, putting in many hours and visiting other community centers in the area.

“The task did do a lot of work and a lot of good work and I really appreciate what it has done,” Schulte said.

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