

SAULT STE. MARIE

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Go-big twin-pad plan is the only way to build it

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The City of Sault Ste. Marie logo, as seen in council chambers.

City councillors are wiping their brow in relief this week.

A last-minute \$18-million injection of funding by the provincial government ultimately saved the twin-pad arena complex.

While council had originally approved a long-term debt limit of \$28,800,000 in January, and decided to press forward to see where the tenders came in, the message was clear.

If the twin pad arena would cost more than the \$28.8 million to build the facility, as designed, it wasn't going to happen – at least not in that form.

Talk was already underway to cut the project in half, building just one ice surface and leaving the second one for some time in the future, perhaps when government money for recreational projects become available.

The delay would eventually increase the costs for another phase of the project, putting the second ice surface at risk.

While not all councillors were in favor of a one ice-pad option, I'm guessing the discussion would have also revolved around some major pencil sharpening, slicing and dicing the planned complex according to costs in an attempt to get the price tag to a more favorable figure council could live with.

For starters, the \$1 million walking track and bowl windows would be out the door. There are other places area residents can lace up their sneakers, including the GFL Memorial Gardens.

The community meeting rooms would likely be wiped out, along with some of the other amenities and 'extras' that will make this facility a great recreational centre when it is completed.

We've seen what those pencil sharpening techniques have created in the past and one can only guess what they would have meant to the Northern Community Centre.

Just look at the GFL Memorial Gardens. The city's premier sports and entertainment facility was shortchanged when it was first built. Initial plans to create suites around the entire facility were scaled back to just the westerly wall. The 'intention' at the time of the build was to add the rest of the suites in future phases, as need warranted and money became available. While that expansion has been costed out since the original build, the plan has never materialized. The money has never been there and I doubt it will ever get completed.

So city council can thank the provincial government for ensuring that it didn't have to have a lengthy discussion on if it would scale back the project, or if so, how the scaled back version would be achieved.

They can also thank the province for ensuring that the Northern Community Centre will get completed – as initially planned out many years ago, and be able to be showcased as a state-of-the-art recreation and community centre.

Ice user groups will have additional opportunities to book the valued ice time and perhaps choose not to travel to other communities to utilize ice time. A previously commissioned study showed that there is a desire, for years to come, to see good use from the ice surfaces.

It was also touted that the two NHL-size rinks can bring larger tournaments to Sault Ste. Marie. Now it's up to tournament organizers to get their marketing gear together and plan some big tournaments for the post-COVID era when sporting events and travel can resume.

The twin-pad facility plan includes the two NHL size ice pads, 10 accessible player change rooms and additional change rooms for referees. One ice pad will have room for 750 spectators, the second for 300.

Community meeting rooms, gathering areas, concession stands, washrooms, a pro shop and ticket office are also part of the plans.

In any event, the city will be building a facility at the fraction of a price it had expected to build it. It will also realize additional savings on interest costs and the term of financing the project – estimated to be a cool \$10-million that can be used elsewhere in the community.

Mayor Christian Provenzano put it best: "It's always important to have facilities like this in our community and this was a facility that we always intended to have."

I agree. This is the Cadillac version facility and I look forward to its completion.

Elaine Della-Mattia is The Sault Star's political reporter.