COMMUNITY: *250 residents packed Latcham Hall Wednesday night to discuss the town's pool/library plans*

Build it. But will they come?

BY JOAN RANSBERRY
STAFF WRITER

The standing-room only crowd at Latcham Hall Wednesday night made it clear — an indoor swimming pool and a new library is wanted, but not at the proposed South Park location.

Council has agreed in principle to build a $5-million pool/library complex on 20 acres of land at the park, located just south of O'Brien Avenue.

The project involves moving the library to the new 32,000-square-foot facility, relocating three baseball diamonds and moving the Silver Jubilee meeting spot into the vacant library building.

About 250 taxpayers — invited to attend the informal meeting by resident Jim Priebe — decided they need to accomplish three tasks:

• Encourage council to keep the library on Main Street.

• Pressure politicians for more information about the pool before the deal is final.

• Sign a petition against the South Park plan, and present it to council March 23. (The petition calls for the project tax impact to be explained before final approval is given.)

The project has not been subjected to enough consultation, Priebe told the crowd.

"We're not here to stop the pool, but let's have some confidence in the location and the dollars to be spent," Priebe said. "The town needs to provide the facts."

But Mayor Wayne Emmerson insists the process will fall into place in stages and people will get all the information as the town receives it.

"The simple truth is we do not have all the answers now," Emmerson said during an interview Thursday.

The exploration is far from over and further public scrutiny is in the works, he said.

"We want the public to help design the park. We'll discuss issues with regards to access and create a forum where all concerns can be properly and correctly responded to."

"I don't believe in putting the complex in overnight. I want council to take this back to the drawing board, and meet objectives without emptying our pockets," resident Len Batrub said.

Concern that the project will exceed the $5-million budget was also expressed at the meeting, but the mayor said that is unlikely to happen.

It's doubtful council would support a more costly complex, Emmerson said. "I don't think council would back it."

At least three councillors insist all bets are off if costs start to climb.

If it goes past $5 million, "it will be stopped," Ward 5 councillor Judy Scala said during the residents meeting.

"We will not proceed any further. (Capital costs are) capped at $5 million. That will not change."

If it exceeds $5 million, it will be "too expensive," Ward 2 councillor Mark Carroll said. "I will not support building it if that happens."

The complex will be built in a cost-effective manner, Ward 3 councillor Peter Dobrich said. "I want a guarantee that it not be allowed to come in over budget. I'm not sure if that's legal, but I'm asking for a guarantee," he said.

Ward 6 councillor Sue Sherban said she'd put on the brakes at $5.5 million. "It all depends," she said. "If it was $5.5 or $5.6 million, then I would say no."

O'Brien Avenue resident George Lovett cautioned the audience about pointing fingers of blame at town councillors, who he said depend largely on professional and trained staff to advise and guide them in decision making.

"I think council's being mislead by the bureaucrats," said Lovett, a former councillor. "All of a sudden the bureaucrats have you doing what they want. The best way to go on this one is to build the pool at the recreation complex and leave our library where it is."

Chief Administrative Officer Merlin Dewing has reported the projects will, in fact, affect taxes.

Emmerson, on the other hand, said it won't. The indoor pool's operating cost will not translate into a tax hike, he said.

The existing outdoor pool cost taxpayers $30,000 to keep it open last year. Annual operating costs for the new indoor pool will be between $75,000 and $100,000.

Uxbridge's pool broke even this year; the pool complex in Courtice is costing $100,000 a year and Burlington's is coming in at $75,000, Emmerson said.

It makes sense to build a pool near a school or a recreation complex, rural resident Bob Gayton said. "This (South Park) location is atrocious."

But neither the high school nor the recreation complex has enough room to accommodate the project, Emmerson said.

The cost of infrastructure was also raised at the meeting.

"Who's paying for the roads and the ball diamonds?" Bill Murphy asked.

In answer to concerns about traffic, the town has already said O'Brien Avenue will not be a thoroughfare to the construction site or the finished complex.

Instead, Franklin Avenue will act as the main route to and from the site. Road costs, already debated by council, will be linked to the project and handled without difficulty, Carroll said.

The access routes and road costs will not come out of the $5 million, Emmerson said.

The project's architect selection process is underway, and 25 consultants have submitted bids. The architect will be selected next month from a short list of five. "Then we'll hold public meetings," Emmerson said.

But one resident said the town hasn't proven it can take care of the recreation facilities it already has and shouldn't be undertaking further projects.

"Swimming pools are big deals. They're a lot of work and they're a lot of money," Tom Cable said.

The library board has stated the library needs to grow from its present 7,000 square feet to 20,000 square feet in order to serve a growing number of patrons. But critics say the new building isn't looking far enough ahead as far as space needs are concerned.

The South Park plan calls for a 12,000 square foot library. "We're not getting a library much bigger than the one we have now," resident Mark Dewar said.

Some people insist the town can get a better price than the one presented.

A $5-million price tag on this facility is no bargain, Chuck Alldred said. "I've looked at this. It is not cost effective to move the library," he said.

STAFF PHOTOS/STEVE SOMERVILLE

An informal citizens' forum to discuss the town's proposed pool/library complex brought out about 250 residents to Latcham Hall Wednesday night. Clockwise from top left: Meeting organizer Jim Priebe makes a point with the help of an overhead projector. Councillor Sue Sherban explains the town's position, while Lemonville resident Marion Wells speaks her opinion. The crowd listens to all arguments intently. The town has promised to hold open forums, and to allow the public's input into the design of the complex before making any final decisions.