

Memo To: FCA members

From: Alex Cullen, Belltown Neighbours Assoc.

Re: Budget questions re. life-cycle renewal for aging arenas, or

Why the closure of the Belltown Dome is the “canary in the coal mine”

The issue of the lack of funding for life-cycle renewal for Ottawa’s 36 indoor ice arenas came up at the last FCA general meeting. This briefing note is to inform members participating in Councillors’ budget consultation meetings of the issues concerning the lack of funding for necessary replacement and renewal for these aging facilities. The example of the closure of the Belltown Dome was the issue that triggered this discussion.

Recently City staff determined that the Belltown Dome, a sub-standard but popular indoor ice facility with a unique structure located in Ottawa’s west-end, had reached the end of its useful life as an indoor ice arena. They determined that it would become a natural ice facility with no refrigeration, leading to a much shorter season with uncertainty due to potential thaws. The reason for this was that the refrigeration equipment at the Dome was failing, there were mechanical problems, plus the unique Buckminster-style aluminium skin covering was failing as well. City staff estimated the cost to rehabilitate the Dome was \$3.2 million, but as the site was small, there was not a business case to replace the Dome as an indoor rink. City policy for arenas is now based on a 2-ice pad facility and the site at Belltown could not accommodate this.

Not unexpectedly this posed problems for the users of the Belltown Dome, which included not only local residents as well as children from nearby social housing communities (Britannia Woods and Michelle Heights) who used Dome for learn-to-skate programs, but for the various hockey and ringette leagues that used the Dome for practices. As Ottawa has but 36 indoor ice arenas the demand for ice time is high in order to accommodate not only children’s hockey (boys and girls) but adult recreational hockey, ringette, learn-to-skate, figure skating, and more. The closure of the Dome meant for the West End Hockey Association a loss of 500 hours of precious ice time, difficult to make up given the demand for ice time across the city. Other leagues from Kanata and Nepean who also used the Dome face the same challenge.

At present there is no plan to replace the Dome arena, although the City’s current Parks & Recreation Facilities Master Plan calls for one ice pad for 20,000 residents. Belltown Dome was the only indoor ice arena for Bay Ward, population 43,000. This would call for a 2 ice pad facility in Bay Ward at a cost of \$8 to \$12 million.

However, the problem is deeper than that. Most of the City’s 36 arenas are aging – the average age is 45 years. Currently the annual budget for life-cycle replacement for sports facilities for the City is \$22.4 million to cover the 36 arenas – inadequate to repair and build new facilities. Most of the City’s arenas are single-pad ice rinks; the City’s policy is to build/replace with 2-pad ice rinks.

It gets worse. The City's Recreation & Cultural Services Asset Management Plan estimates that, for indoor ice arenas, over the next 10 years \$907 million will be needed for arena renewal, \$166 million will be needed for arena enhancement, and \$655 million will be needed for new arenas as a result of the City's growth, for a whopping total of \$1.8 billion for the next 10 years. And the bad news is, the City is short \$910 million to fulfill this plan.

Currently City Council is developing a budget for 2025 based on a minimum 2.9% tax increase, depending on how it fixes its transit deficit. There is no provision for meeting the shortfall in life-cycle renewal/enhancement/growth for the City's 36 – now 35 arenas with Belltown Dome's closure this season.

So what happens when the refrigeration equipment fails at the next arena? It will likely close as well, given the shortfall in life-cycle funding here. There are no funds to build that 2-pad replacement.

This October, as part of the lead-up to City Council's deliberations for the 2025 City budget, City Councillors will be holding budget consultations in their wards to determine the public's appetite for services and the taxes needed to support them. Many got elected on the promise of keeping taxes down without cutting services. Belltown Dome's closure is a clear loss of service, and, if nothing changes, will be followed by the closure of other community arenas as they age-out. **So, the question to ask Councillors at their budget meetings is: what is going to be done to preserve the City's well-used indoor ice arenas that we have now, and build new ones as the City expands? Where will the money come from?**

Alex Cullen is past-president of the Belltown Neighbours Association