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An artist's conception of the Riverview Energy Centre project was unveiled yesterday. PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

Plans unveiled for proposed Riverview Energy Centre

Centre's board of directors and Town of Riverview each planning their own rec facilities

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TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Two ice surfaces, an Olympic-size swimming pool, 300-seat theatre, indoor sports turf and much more is planned for the Riverview Energy Centre, the planned facility's board of directors announced yesterday.

A capital campaign to help fund the project will be launched in the coming weeks, said Tim Barter, one of the Energy Centre's 12 directors and a past president of the Riverview Minor Hockey Association. He said the board is aiming to have the facility open by fall of 2016.

"We need to step up and do this," Barter told a large crowd gathered at The Cocoa Room on Coverdale Road yesterday. Local business people and residents attended the announcement, along with a couple of Riverview councillors and several staff members.

The project is unrelated to the Town of Riverview's proposed community wellness centre project being considered by town council and staff, despite both projects looking at including many of the same features. The town recently commissioned a feasibility study to examine the wellness centre idea, what it would cost, how to pay for it and the lifespan of existing recreation facilities in town.

Barter couldn't give a dollar figure on what the Energy Centre project would cost, but it will surely be in the millions. He cited examples of other facilities in the Maritimes, in Bouctouche, Pictou County and Quispamsis, that ranged in price from \$20 million to \$35 million. He said a business plan for the centre is being tweaked and finalized by A.C. Stevenson and Partners and should be revealed in the coming weeks.

Part of that plan includes area partners becoming tenants in the facility and using it during regular business hours. During evenings and weekends, the facility would be open for the community at large to use at a subsidized rate. The facility would also include a gymnasium, walk/run track and community event spaces that could be open to weddings and other functions.

Barter called it "new world thinking," saying you can't just construct a new facility and hope people show up to use it.

"We can harness capital horsepower" from around the region and from local businesses, he said. The centre would be privately run and operate like a

business, and would aim to build a community within it and grow with partnerships. The not-for-profit organization would put any money gained back into programs and to ensuring all children have access to the facility.

Barter also said an offer has been made and accepted on a piece of land for the project, but since the deal isn't finalized he couldn't say where the land is.

Barter said a project of this magnitude in the town is long overdue and the youth of Riverview need new, modern sports facilities. In addition to Riverview Minor Hockey, Riverview Soccer Association, Wee College and Andrews Hockey Growth Programs International were named partners in the project.

"It's not only good for our club, it is a good thing for our community and the whole Greater Moncton area," said Brian Bessey, president of Riverview Minor Hockey.

If all goes according to plan, Andrews Hockey Growth Programs would become a permanent tenant within the centre, along with Wee College, which plans to open a private school for kindergarten to Grade 3.

Asked about the Town of Riverview's proposed wellness centre project and duplication between the two concepts, Barter said the town was approached some time ago about partnering with the centre's board.

"To be honest with you, they (the projects) sound very similar because we presented this over 2½ years ago to the town and we asked them to be partners with us at that time," Barter said. He said the town decided to go their own route, but he holds no animosity over the issue.

"The door is always open for them to walk through if they want to be part of the Riverview Energy Centre," he said. "It is a true community centre and having the town involved makes a lot of sense."

He feels there is no need to spend tens of thousands of dollars on a feasibility study. The town is paying \$73,835, plus tax, on its study.

"Maybe we just go out and say, 'These people will pay for it, let's make sure that the rest of the community can use it and that it's a sustainable project,'" Barter said.

He said the centre's board has done studies of its own, attained through in-kind services and help from partners.

Riverview Coun. Tom Toner is chairman of the community wellness centre committee struck by Mayor Ann Seamans. He wasn't able to attend yesterday's Energy Centre announcement. He

said while the centre's board did come to council in the past, they were looking for money and a donation of land and presented no business or capital plan to council. He said he has yet to see a business plan from the group.

"They have a dream, but we have the groundwork done," he said. Toner stressed that council is accountable to Riverview taxpayers and must do due diligence before proceeding with any major project. He stressed that the town has consulted closely with residents, through open houses at town hall, ward meetings and consultations in local schools.

Toner said the process is taking longer than council or residents would like, but it's important to do things "the right way."

Mayor Ann Seamans was at another announcement and couldn't attend the event, but said their plans sound good.

"You have to say that they have really great ideas, they really do," she said. "They put a lot of work into it."

Seamans said she also hasn't seen a business plan from the group, and the centre's board has a timeline that the town simply can't meet.

"It's not a competition," she said. "We're working toward getting this (community wellness) centre, but in the town's view we have to do it cautiously because there is a lot of money involved."

She said there will be no duplication if the centre succeeds with their project, and she would be happy to see it happen.

"It would never be duplicated, really," she said. "They're expectancy to open in 2016, that's well before ours. Obviously at that point we wouldn't proceed. We wouldn't be building another building to compete with theirs. Like I said, it's not a competition."

She said there may be a point where the two sides can meet, but she doesn't feel now is the right time. The town's community wellness centre committee will continue its work in the meantime. The feasibility study, if undertaken, will help the town in determining the lifespan and future plans for existing facilities, the mayor said.

Riverview Deputy Mayor Russell Hayward attended the Energy Centre announcement on Tuesday.

"It was an excellent presentation," he said. "We've seen some of that done with the town, so I'm curious maybe if there's some duplication and how maybe we could get everybody together on the same page."

Coun. Cecile Cassista also attended the announcement, but declined to comment on it.