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Published on Aspen Daily News Online (<http://www.aspendailynews.com>)

Aspen City Council split on ARC expansion

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Aspen City Council asked for more information about a proposal to add better fitness and weight room facilities to the Aspen Recreation Center, but council members are split on notions of competing with the private sector.

The ARC, which opened in 2003, suffers from a small and windowless basement weight room and a 700-square-foot cardio deck. Both facilities were added after the center was opened after an outcry from users. The ARC's main attractions are an indoor aquatic facility and an ice rink.

The expansion proposal — estimated to cost between \$3 and \$3.7 million — would add weights and cardio equipment to a floor that would be added above the pool. It's estimated that the expanded facility would add an additional \$100,000 to \$150,000 annual subsidy to the recreation department, which already operates at about a \$1 million annual deficit for all of the city's recreation programs.

With four council members present at the informal meeting on Tuesday — Councilman Derek Johnson was absent — the board was split on whether it would be appropriate for the city to invest more money into the ARC and potentially take business away from other private fitness clubs in town.

Councilman Dwayne Romero said he didn't want to "crowd out" others in the fitness sector. He also questioned the wisdom in pursuing a project that would require public debt, given current economic uncertainties.

Aspen Mayor Mick Ireland was more open to government-subsidized gym rats. Referencing the current land use debate over a proposal to expand the Aspen Club and Spa into a timeshare lodge, Ireland said private health clubs may not always be around to provide fitness facilities. Aspen Club officials have said that if their project is not approved, the club may sell to another developer who would raze it and build single-family homes.

"I don't concur that we have an obligation never to serve (city residents) because we might compete with private business," Ireland said. "Sometimes there is a place for competition."

Councilman Torre said that a better fitness facility at the ARC would in fact take some business from local athletic clubs.

"Whether that's one or a hundred, I don't know," he said. However, he said the city does have an interest in providing its residents with quality weight room facilities at a reasonable price.

Council asked to see more details on the financials surrounding the expansion proposal and a better fleshing out of what competition from an expanded ARC would mean to other fitness clubs in town. Due to covenants on the ARC, no expansion work could be done until 2013.

City Manager Steve Barwick recommended the council revisit the expansion question during this summer's budget planning for 2011.

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archive_date:

1 day

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