

THE PRINCE GEORGE CITIZEN

New Kin Centres offers lots of ice

Frank PEEBLES / Staff writer

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- Construction continues on the Kin 2 extension.

Long after the 2015 Canada Winter Games are over, the new Kin Centres complex will continue to serve the city.

The construction site is more than 40 per cent complete, with the tear-down of the derelict Kin 1 building finished, the revamped Kin 2 dressing rooms and backstage foyer finished, and the superstructure replacement of Kin 1, additions to Kin 2, and the concession/lounge upgrades now underway.

In order to score the big goals the municipality has for the facility, some major dominoes had to fall. The biggest one was to have a fully functional set of rinks all under one roof.

Andy Beesley, the City of Prince George's manager of CN Centre and recreation facilities, said that many cities have multi-rink buildings but typically the ice sheets are lined up in a row connected by a long, narrow hallway. The foyer, concession and retail spaces were usually far away from the ice. Often there was a lot of crossover noise from sheet to sheet (for example, referee whistles from neighbouring games were easily overheard by players on the next rink over). Often, there were limited audience amenities from one rink to the next.

The new Kin Centres are intended to build on the insightful original plans when it was first built more than 40 years ago. This facility will behave more like a suite of boutique ice rinks than a strip mall of ice rinks.

"What makes us unique in North America is how we are compact. We are under one roof with attractive, usable common space connecting it all," said Beesley. "The public and the event participants will have a sensible interactive flow like no other place I know of. We have multiple competition ice sheets, practice ice, organization and storage space, plenty of easy public access to multiple points of interest, in summertime we will have special features in place for lacrosse and inline hockey and for dormitory sleeping for incoming teams. It will work just as well for trade shows and conventions. This is an attractive facility for event organizers. Already we have had people from other communities talking to us about our facility designs."

Beesley said the place was designed more with 2030 in mind than 2015. The starting point for the design phase was flexibility.

Kin 1 will, like CN Centre next door, be able to have NHL or Olympic sheet sizes, but Kin 1 will also be built specifically for sledge hockey. If you start with sledge requirements, he explained, it is easy to accommodate the spectrum of other sports, but much harder to modify the other way. Sledge has to have maximum access abilities, like benches at ice level for sliding the sledges into for line changes without a step up, and transparent boards from the ice to the top so the corner plays and peripheral action can be seen by all.

The outer facilities correspondingly need wider doorways and corridors, elevator access to upper floor features like the lounge, roomy dressing rooms with wider benches and appropriate showers. Install all this and able-bodied people can use it just fine but the reverse is not true, so maximum mobility considerations were made from the start.

Besides, said Beesley, dedicated sledge hockey features could reap millions in return rewards for the community.

"We have given the future of this facility all those options. The economic potential of that is enormous," he said. "It is adding a whole new sport to the list of things this community can do to generate income. We are at the front end of the sledge hockey curve so the benefits could be significant."

The focus on sledge features cost little in the Kin Centre's development budget compared to the potential payoff. Any one sport's single event can easily infuse a million dollars or more into the local economy. At a final price tag of just over \$16.5 million, even discounting the financial injection of the 2015 Canada Winter Games (estimated to be worth well more than \$70 million to this region's pocketbook), it doesn't take long to ledger-justify the investment.

"The rebuild of the Kin Centres was a critical component to us winning the [2015] bid in the first place, so it was important from that point of view," said Tara Bogh, manager of economic development at Initiatives Prince George. "Those facilities mattered to the decision making process. You have elite athletes and officials coming for this event, and where they do their work makes a big difference."

But the grassroots impact is the most important part of these facilities, she added. When the Games are gone, the highest level of sport and summertime trade/business events can be held there. The average citizen may not realize it, Bogh explained, but this city is in a battle with other communities to win new residents and keeping the ones who already live here.

"Any time communities are making investments in their infrastructure it says a lot about its commitment to its residents, it says a lot about how we view our quality of life," she said. "In Prince George we've been called sports crazy and we're pretty good at the arts as well. When you set yourself up well in those areas you are going to draw people to the community who are unique, skilled, who build on the character of the city, and provide that personality a thriving city needs."

The newly revamped facilities are scheduled to be finished by fall of this year, in time for the new ice sport season.

COLD, HARD FACTS

CN Centre = 6,000-seat Olympic/NHL ice sheet

Kin 1 = 1,000-seat Olympic/NHL/sledge ice sheet

Kin 2 = 600-seat NHL sheet

Kin 3 = 250-seat NHL sheet

Plus: Atrium, lounge, concession, multiple meeting and office spaces, storage, officials' rooms, maintenance amenities, pro shop, and more all under one roof. Ample parking and easy load-in access on the outside.

The new Kin Centres will be able to play host not just to recreational sports by local residents but also top-level competition in a variety of other sports from athletes around the world.

Minor hockey continues to be popular with more than 1,000 boys and girls every year lacing up the skates in the Prince George Minor Hockey Association.

Only three weekends this winter were empty of tournament bookings at local rinks, said Andy Beesley, the city's manager of recreation facilities. Each of those tournaments brought in multiple teams from out of town. The scope would only grow with the new facilities, said Beesley - more teams, farther afield teams, higher level events and longer stays.

"That is just what a local user group can do, and that is just hockey. Add in speedskaters, ringette, figure skaters, lacrosse, inline hockey, imagine the new potential of sledge hockey, and then there are concerts and conventions and trade shows that can also benefit from a lot of the same features," he said.

Hockey Canada only grabbed hold of sledge hockey following the 1998 Olympics/Paralympics, as an official part of the overall national hockey strategy, but grab they did. Hockey Canada's director of marketing, Dean McIntosh, said Prince George is making a wise early investment in the burgeoning branch of the sport and it has been noticed at their national headquarters.

"We certainly congratulate communities like Prince George for taking that step," he said. "We're thrilled about that. We spend a lot of time identifying places that can host any of our events. We have been to Prince George many times before for other events, we know the town well, we know you can host things well in general, so adding this feature is a very pleasing development from our perspective."

Right now there are few international tournaments for sledge hockey. Lack of facilities is a big reason. McIntosh said he could count on one hand the number of communities anywhere in Canada that have already gotten in on the booming new version of hockey. The big event is the Paralympics held in conjunction with the Winter Olympic Games every four years. Also, the International Paralympic Committee holds a world championship tournament each non-Paralympic year and Canada has yet to host it. Since Canada is one of the strongest nations at this event, Hockey Canada wants this to change soon.

McIntosh said there is an international invitational tournament Canada hosts called the World Sledghockey Challenge which has been held so far only in Calgary, Charlottetown, London, and Kelowna. A small two-team series has been hosted by Quebec City in 2012 and this year in Rockland, Ontario between team Canada and a challenger nation (once the U.S., once Norway), showing that competition innovations are starting to occur as the sport grows.

Getting in on the ground floor, he said, puts Prince George in a great position to host perhaps even a fully sanctioned international event, since those require sledge-ready facilities more than modified rinks. Host successfully once, he said, and it increases your chances of being a host again for other events.

"It is a big boon for us nationally as we see more and more athletes turning to sledge hockey across Canada," McIntosh said. "We are in the very beginnings of organizing towards a national-type championships. There are indicators the sport is growing and becoming more successful across the country at the community level and that will feed upwards to what we're working hard to do at the national level."

Kin 1 stands to take the already successful Prince George Blizzard Speedskating Club to new levels. Their speeds have literally outstripped their longtime home rink at the Coliseum.

"As a club we are very dependent on the new Kin 1," said Dennis Young, president of the Blizzards. "It is bigger ice. The Coliseum isn't even NHL-sized ice. Our high performance kids have a hard time even practicing because if you fall, there is no time to get into position to hit the crash mats properly. There is a real safety concern there. We have a number of skaters now who are consistently hitting those speeds. We know there is a lot of demand on the Kin 1 ice, we are willing to work with the city, but we need to have bigger ice."

Like their hockey counterparts, the local speedskating club has also done well at hosting past high-caliber events. The development of those local organizers and officials will dovetail into the capabilities of the new ice facilities. Already the club has applied to host the 2014 Canadian Short Track Speedskating Championships, which would bring many of the same athletes expected back for the Canada Winter Games the next winter, thus developing a real relationship between this community and those visiting people from all over the country.

"We cannot host this event at the Coliseum, it's too fast, and hosting at CN Centre is difficult because of the Cougars playing at the same time. If our club is centred at Kin 1, we would have a perfect base of operations," said Young. "It represents a pretty fair economic income, each event. The club has its own hosting budget, the last one was close to \$15,000, and the people coming here bring their money to spend. We would probably apply to host one big event every single year [after the major 2015 event] -

provincials at least, the Western Canadians is a brand new event and we have already hosted once - so we stand to bring in a lot of revenue to the city if we have a proper facility, and Kin 1 would be that. "

BC Ringette executive director Wayne Lesley said this city has a consistent history of hosting successful events and the new complex is another mark in Prince George's favour.

"BC Ringette has encouraged Prince George Ringette to consider future hosting opportunities and would further support that knowing the city's increased facility capacity," said Lesley. "The addition of new or the upgrading of existing facilities would support future hosting of this nature and likely improve the odds of successful hosting bids.

"Like most sport tourism, ringette creates an economic spinoff through hundreds of participants and participant families all needing food, lodging, etc., while attending an event," he added. "In the case of winter sports, that's also a shot of tourism revenue during what would not be considered a prime tourism time of the year. Increased facilities should also create opportunities for simultaneous event hosting [hockey practice could still go ahead even with a ringette tournament in the same complex, for example], something not always possible with a limited number of weekends and ice surfaces in other places."

There is a provincial shortage of ice time, said Lesley, that holds back the development of winter athletics in general. Prince George is taking steps to reduce that pain.

"Especially for youth sports like ringette, the ability to access ice at reasonable hours at reasonable cost can be a make-or-break proposition for growth and development. Added public facilities should remove this barrier," he said, at least in Prince George. The stronger the association in any given town, he added, the better their ability to host major events.

Beesley said the unwritten theme attached to the 2015 Canada Winter Games is "capacity building." All the sports that might ever be of interest to local people will be on display at the highest levels of officiating and athleticism, all at the same time.

"It upgrades the facilities and the people in long-term ways," he said. "The Canada Winter Games will be the biggest possible sporting event that Canada can offer, ever, anywhere. When you want to use the facilities later for a world sledge hockey challenge or a figure skating championship, that's a relative piece of cake. As a community we'll have already done such a bigger thing."

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