

Ice Issues In Fort Chipewyan

By SHAWN BELL

A sheet of ice in downtown Fort McMurray in the middle of July may be a preview of Fort Chipewyan's future arena.

The Municipality of Wood Buffalo is examining synthetic ice – a plastic supplement for frozen ice – for arenas throughout the region, including the Archie Simpson Memorial Arena in Fort Chip, during a pilot project from July 11 to 20.

That comes after the municipality voted down installing artificial ice in Fort Chipewyan, something councillor David Blair was pushing for, due to the price tag of roughly \$1.5 to \$2 million.

The result of council's decision, by a vote of seven to two, is that Fort Chipewyan's arena will open this autumn with natural ice, and have the prospect of synthetic ice if the pilot project proves successful.

"The municipality is very excited about the possibility of installing synthetic ice throughout the region," said Carol Theberge, general manager of community services in a press release. "It is used by several NHL teams for training, and would allow for recreational activity in Wood Buffalo from January 1 to December 31."

Glacé Synthétique du Canada, based in Dorval Quebec, is in Fort McMurray this July

offering the display of a synthetic ice sheet for skaters. Company president Francois Bilodeau told *The Journal* synthetic ice is an alternative to natural ice that takes more energy and more force for skating, with roughly 90 per cent the frictional coefficient of regular ice.

"I would not play 40 minutes non-stop on synthetic ice," Bilodeau said. "It's too hard. But for novice, atom and peewee, it's very possible to play a league on it."

Bilodeau followed that by laying out the benefits of synthetic ice; namely that people can skate on it all year, it is relatively cheap to install and requires little maintenance.

But the key consideration is that the synthetic ice sheet can be flooded in winter, so for very little extra money Fort Chipewyan could have natural ice in the coldest months and synthetic ice for the rest of the year.

"(The children) will get so in shape during summer, in good shape for the winter," Bilodeau said. "After skating on synthetic ice they will be so fast on regular ice."

Bilodeau estimates a full-size rink of synthetic ice, 85 feet by 200 feet, at \$18 per square-foot, would cost under \$70,000 for materials. An installation fee of around \$6,000 plus the purchase of a floor-cleaning machine



This synthetic ice rink was set up in the summer by the same company running the pilot project in Fort McMurray. Fort Chipewyan's arena will get synthetic ice if the pilot project is successful.

would raise the price to roughly \$80,000.

As for maintenance, skates dig up a plastic residue on synthetic ice that requires cleaning every couple of days. A glide-enhancer liquid must be applied every few days, and every second week the floor must be cleaned with a traditional floor cleaner.

Synthetic ice has a lifespan of around ten years, but when one side wears out you can flip the plastic sheet for another 10 years of use.

Construction on the Archie Simpson Arena is set to finish this autumn. If synthetic

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