

The Saratogian (saratogian.com), Serving the Saratoga Springs, N.Y. region

Opinion

Reader's View: Recreation center just makes sense

Published: Sunday, August 30, 2009

By SCOTT JOHNSON, mayor of Saratoga Springs

My Fellow Saratogians,

There has been much discussion about the construction of a recreation and community center here in Saratoga Springs, especially in tough economic times. When I took office in 2008, I had to decide whether to move forward with this project. I asked myself two questions: Does it make fiscal sense, and will it benefit our community?

To answer the first question, it's important to remember that this issue has been talked about for well over a decade. There were numerous committees appointed, and numerous City Councils have discussed it and agreed on its merits.

The previous City Council, in place prior to my taking office in 2008, had unanimously voted by July 2007 to bond the full cost of the project, borrowing money to ensure its construction. My opponent, in fact, is on the record as saying that he believed the recreation center was a top priority and should be built, specifically because money had already been borrowed to build it.

If the city were to abandon this project — as my opponent now claims we should — the taxpayers would lose more than \$1.25 million, paid on the borrowed bond funds. If we abandon it now, it's like the burden of paying a mortgage without ever building your house.

I entered office on a pledge to provide common sense leadership, and losing more than \$1.25 million, and having nothing to show for it, makes no sense at all. I know I may take a political hit for my decision, and that's alright. Decisions like these separate those who can provide leadership from those seeking to avoid criticism just to stay in office.

The second question is whether the recreation and community center will benefit Saratoga Springs. The answer is absolutely yes. For the first time, we'll have a year-round facility for recreation and leisure programs, all under one roof. The center is

ideally located in town, with easy access by foot, bike and public bus that doesn't depend on parents to drive their children. We will no longer have to travel to different communities and pay rental space for our programs.

The center will improve the quality of life for currently underserved members of our community, including the many seniors, teens and families with young children.

Our state-of-the-art center will also allow us to host athletic tournaments and other programs, in turn stimulating our local economy by bringing visitors and residents alike to our restaurants, shops and hotels.

Additionally, I'm optimistic that we can generate enough revenue from the use of our recreation center to significantly offset operating costs.

The time is now for all of us to embrace this community need. The bonding was long ago put in place, more than three years ago, and since then we've all been paying taxes on it. Our recreation and community center will be used and enjoyed by all Saratogians for generations to come. It just makes common sense.

Scott Johnson is mayor of Saratoga Springs.