



The Archie Browning Sports Centre

On April 17th 2007, my daughter came home from Kindergarten in tears. She had heard that the Archie Browning Sports Centre (ABSC) was closing. Less than 24hrs after the decision was made in Council Chambers....5 year olds in Esquimalt were talking about it.

In just six days the community rallied. A website was built, an online petition was started, signs were made, letters were written and people showed up at the next Council meeting. In fact, so many people showed up on April 23rd, 2007 that we couldn't fit into Council Chambers. We were packed into the lobby, we were outside on the steps and we were taking turns watching each others' children in the park.

Like many others in my community, I wrote letters to Council and got up to speak. This is my letter to Council: www.alisongaul.ca/documents/19Apr07.pdf . A shorter version was printed in the Times Colonist and I spoke to this issue that night.

At the close of that meeting there was a motion on the table to NOT close ABSC. The public would have to wait another week.

When April 30th arrived more than 450 people flooded the Jubilee Hall at the Rec Centre. One after another people got up to speak and made excellent points. A few hours later, it was my turn to speak again. This time I simply pledged my commitment to doing whatever it would take to save ABSC. I made that commitment to my daughter on April 17th when she was in tears. I made it to my community on April 30th. Since then I have tried to live up to that promise.

During this time there was a lot of media attention paid to this issue. Some of the articles are here: www.alisongaul.ca/documents/20Apr07.pdf .

At this point, I started attending Council meetings regularly, searching for a way to live up to my promise. I was fortunate to meet many great people at this time. Beth Burton-Krahn and I got to know one another and we decided to put

together the Esquimalt Residents Association as a non-partisan group where people could connect and discuss all the issues facing Esquimalt. I met a number of great people who were concerned about losing ABSC and we formed the Friends of Archie Browning Sports Centre. Please see the website here: www.friendsofabsc.com .

In June of 2007, I was appointed to the ABSC Facility Audit Committee. This group of people was tasked with making recommendations on all aspects of the Sports Centre Programs and Operations. It was an honour to work on this committee and produce the Audit that was presented to the Parks and Rec Commission on November 1st, 2007. The Commission strongly and unanimously endorsed the report. The audit then went forward from Commission to Council in December of 2007.

Some of the key things I learned while working on the Audit are:

- ABSC has no major structural deficits.
- The barrel roofs over the ice surfaces are good for another 20-25 years.
- The subsidy to ABSC has been decreasing in recent years.
- The Rec Centre on Fraser (the pool rec centre) is subsidized approximately twice as much and brings in approximately 1/2 the revenue as ABSC.
- The subsidy is in line with other similar facilities in the region.
- Public consultation on ABSC has been done several times in recent years. Results have ALWAYS shown support for maintaining the facility.

The Audit is here: www.alisongaul.ca/documents/background.pdf .

Some media attention has been given to the Audit Report. A sampling of that is here: www.alisongaul.ca/documents/news_articles.pdf .

When I spoke to Council about ABSC in April of 2007, I was operating under the assumption that no public consultation had gone into the decision to close ABSC. I was unaware of the number of people who had already dedicated time and energy to studying the facility's future. Input HAD been given to Council on a number of occasions. All the input suggested keeping ABSC open.

In 2004 Esquimalt completed a Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan. The strategic plan looks at all aspects of our Parks and Recreation. In the summary it states, "the community believes in parks and recreation and feel that it is operating at about as low a level of service as is possible." It even states that 70% of people surveyed would be willing to pay more for the services that already exist. The Strategic Plan is clear that people value the recreation opportunities that exist in Esquimalt. It recommended that a full review be done of ABSC to address the fact that it is an aging facility.

As a response, the Sports Centre Review began in 2005 and looked at 3 options:

1. Demolish existing facility and do not replace with another sports facility
2. Pursue enhanced use of existing facility and undertake rehabilitation as a means of addressing the immediate roof, hot water, and dressing room problems while developing a "long-term" solution
3. New facility

This committee, which spanned two Councils, recommended Option 2. The report contains a careful analysis of the three options. A basic cost/benefit analysis does not show that a new facility is needed. Maintaining and revitalizing the existing one is the preferred option. Building a brand new facility is cost prohibitive. We do not have the land for it anywhere else in Esquimalt. A smaller facility that did not support the Victoria Cougars, big shows/exhibitions, and curling could have an economic impact on the Plaza and surrounding businesses.

As part of this review, a survey was conducted at Buccaneer Days and at the Gorge Park 100th anniversary celebration. Results showed that 86% of respondents said "upgrade the building".

On October 1, 2005, there was also a day long Community Leaders Workshop. Among the questions asked at that workshop was, "How would Esquimalt be different without the Archie Browning Sports Centre?" The report states, "the principal theme emerging from these discussions was that the loss of the Archie Browning Sports Centre would be devastating for the community. The loss would be multi-faceted, from lost programs and services to lessened economic activity and from lost opportunities for young people to a loss of image within the region. There was a strong sense that without the Archie Browning Sports Centre Esquimalt would suffer on all three sustainability fronts - socially, economically and environmentally."

In September of 2006, the Sports Centre Review delivered its report to Council. It made it clear, from almost 2 years of study, that the single best option for ABSC and the community of Esquimalt was to keep ABSC. In April of 2007, Council voted to close it anyways.

Since then, we have also collected more public feedback from the Esquimalt Village Project. Again, the public has spoken loudly about keeping the amenities of ABSC.

I strongly endorse:

- the recommendations of the 2007 ABSC facility Audit.
- the recommendations of the 2006 Sports Centre Review.
- Making long term plans for ABSC now. These long terms plans have to include ALL the services and amenities that currently exist at ABSC. I support having an arena large enough to support the Victoria Cougars. I support having a curling rink. I support the Food and Beverage service.
- Increasing revenue and usage of ABSC by developing a plan and marketing the "dry floor" when curling is out.
- Applying for grants to further revitalize the facility.
- Pursuing alternate forms of funding like "density bonusing" funds from development and working with community groups like Friends of Archie Browning Sports Centre to host community fundraising efforts.
- Completing energy efficient upgrades.
- Listening to public feedback and input.
- Recognizing the economic impact losing ABSC, our only regional draw, would have on surrounding businesses.
- Making it very clear to our residents, facility users and to local businesses that we will not be losing ABSC.

We need to make our commitment to ABSC now. Hesitating costs us. Revenue generating bookings are lost. The opportunity to cut costs by making upgrades that are energy efficient is lost. The opportunity to pursue grants and alternate forms of funding are lost. Trust has been lost.

We need to commit to ABSC and develop long terms plans. Now.