

Mavrinac lands move towards park use

By Brock Weir

For over two years, a six acre parcel of land on Mavrinac Boulevard has been touted as 'parkland' - either with air quotes or through punctuation here; but, this week, the quotation marks could come off as Council moves towards designating the land for park use.

The contentious parcel of land, which was at the centre of a dispute between the Town of Aurora, Minto Communities, and the dozens of homeowners surrounding the property, could take shape as a park as early as this spring following Council's tentative decision at the committee level last week.

Should the Committee's recommendation be approved at Council this week, staff will be directed to come up with a design and development plan for the property with options coming back for Council's consideration by May 3.

While it still needs to be formally approved this week, the decision was greeted with extended applause from crowds of neighbours who filled Council Chambers last Tuesday to weigh in on the future of the land, and absorb the comments of lawmakers.

In a near-unanimous decision, Council opted to back the neighbours in their fight to keep the property green space. The land was initially earmarked as the site of a new school by the York Catholic District School Board but, when the Board released its rights to the property, the Town moved to exercise its right of first refusal to buy the land at terms 'and prices' originally set out in the area's 2007 subdivision agreement.

After legal wrangling with Minto, the Town ultimately purchased the land from Cash In Lieu of Parkland reserves, at the 2007 prices, but the Town's draft new Parks and Recreation Plan recommends the property be sold and the proceeds returned to reserves to secure parkland in other 'less serviced' areas of Aurora.

'The Cash-in-Lieu that came out of this community should go back into this lot,' said Councillor Harold Kim, referencing an option before Council to sell the land to another school board or school developer. 'It is not just an optics issue, there is a trust issue between the residents and the Town in terms of buying this land and selling it off to another school when there is an opportunity here to build something even better for the residents.'

A similar view was offered by Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who questioned the relevancy of the Town's current Parks and Rec plan which states there are no gaps in parkland in Aurora's 2B neighbourhood.

'[That is] because there was going to be a school with a park there,' she said. 'That situation has changed and, of course, the Parks and Rec Plan in 2010 couldn't have known that.'

Councillor Paul Pirri, who has previously spoken about his difference of opinion with Mavrinac-area residents on the future use of this property was not present at last week's General Committee meeting, leaving Mayor Geoff Dawe to be the one dissenting voice on proceeding with this land as a park.

He supported the initial recommendation from Parks and Recreation Director Al Downey 'not to proceed with fully developed parkland at this time' pending a further report to Council on 'other potential options' for its use.

'The reason I support the staff recommendation is we also have a Master Plan Mr. Downey and the consultants have been working on for quite a while and we haven't even discussed that,' said Mayor Dawe. 'We're already going outside what may or may not be in that document so we haven't [even given] the courtesy to look at the staff report with respect to the new master plan.'

'We seem to be portrayed as the bad guys on the disposition of this land when it was the school board. I have never seen the school

board held accountable for their decision, which I find very annoying, to be frank. Cash in Lieu should not be considered territorial. I don't think it is appropriate to say that housing in this particular area contributed to the pot has to go back into that area. That is not the concept of how the Town works, certainly not my understanding of how the Town works.?

Compounding this, he added, were delegations from neighbouring residents earlier in the evening who presented very different ideas as to the kind of park that was needed in the area.

?We took 17 years to come to a decision on what to do with the youth centre and we're finally looking at what to do with Library Square 16 years after the decision was made,? he concluded. ?This is not to say I am in favour of selling it, it is not to say I am in favour of keeping it. It is to say I am in favour of looking at staff's recommendation as to how that serves the entire community.?

For other members of Council, enough time had passed to get down to business.

?Two-and-a-half years later, we're finally starting to talk about what we can do with the property and I think that is the better discussion,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?I would like to see us start moving the conversation towards what we can do for the benefit of the neighbourhood and the community rather than a discussion on what we can get for it if we sell it.

?60 days is not enough time to have a final decision on the project, but that is not what I am looking for. It is to continue to move this issue forward. The report will probably show some of the concept drawings we had previously but more importantly it will alleviate the issue of using the space for the time being, the cleanup, maybe it is a community project to help clean it up, but let's get the ball rolling, have the timelines, and start to outline the process in terms of how we're going to move forward with the decision.?