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Export date: Fri Mar 29 8:56:48 2024 / +0000 GMT

Hallmark land decision sparks debate on community needs

By Brock Weir

The push to convert 12 acres of Industrial Parkway South lands into fields to address Aurora's mounting sports needs has sparked accusations of electioneering around the Council table.

Council this week is expected to approve the design and tendering of building two baseball diamonds on the Hallmark lands, a plot of land purchased by the Town at Industrial Parkway South and Vandorf Road in 2015 for municipal purposes.

The design of the diamonds, to the tune of $3 million, was approved at the Committee level last week, but not before a delegation from former councillor John Gallo who said this $3 million build would be a misuse of tax dollars.

?You purchased a property in 2015 for $7.4 million,? said Mr. Gallo. ?It is 13 acres, the current value based on recent sales in Aurora is between 1.8 and 2 million per acre, which gives us approximately $25 million. The zoning is being converted from employment lands to recreational, which will eliminate any property tax levy in perpetuity. That is not a small claim. Converting employment lands to anything is a serious thing in this Town and we have been told that time and time again. Property taxes generated on that property, if it were fully built out, would be in excess of $1 million a year.

?Your proposal to spend $3 million on two baseball diamonds with a value of $25 million plus $3 million is $28 million for two diamonds. That is $14 million per diamond. It is my view that the cost to build the Stewart Burnett Baseball Diamond in 2009 was around $1 million, excluding the land.To summarize, you have an asset worth $25 million. Should we decide to build the baseball diamonds, it is a $25 million investment and a loss of property taxes forever.?

Mr. Gallo went on to suggest the Town sell the Hallmark lands, take the proceeds and invest in repurposing current recreational assets to address the growing needs of baseball and soccer within the community, including adding baseball diamonds to Machell Park, across the street from the Aurora Community Centre.

This was a position adopted by Councillor John Abel following the delegation.

?I am looking at fiscal responsibility. If I am going to construct a ball diamond, I am going to do it in the most responsible way,? said Councillor Abel. ?We have to look at the whole picture here. If you tell me I am going to build a ball diamond for $4.5 million, that is not responsible. You have to look at little harder and do a little better than that. Yes, we looked at the Hallmark lands and I think we had our eye on the building and looking at leveraging that into a multi-sport facility.

?We have to think long-term for our community. We can't be giving away employment land. We have to guard and make that available for the long-term sustainability for our community. If we have an opportunity to move that land and sell it, [with the money we gain] we can build our multisport facility with that.?

The Councillor said it would be a better use of funds to construct two further baseball diamonds at Machell Park.

The problem, however, as pointed out by Councillor Jeff Thom, is going into last week's General Committee meeting, building sports fields on the Hallmark lands was one of the top pledges made by Councillor Abel on the website touting his mayoral bid.

?I will provide sports facilities/fields at Hallmark Lands at GW Williams and the new Bayview High School to be built,? said the website on Tuesday evening before the passage was removed on Wednesday morning.

?I am just simply mentioning your position has changed, it's public,? said Councillor Jeff Thom.

Meanwhile, Councillor Wendy Gaertner added, ?This is sounding a lot like election-speak.?

?I never thought of buying this land in terms of taxes and tax laws, but at the end of the day?we have to look at community benefit and we have been looking at a piece of land for so long and there is nothing,? she continued. ?Who knows, we might get lucky and find another piece of land somewhere ? people have mentioned Bloomington ? but we have other needs. Soccer has needs, we have all other kinds of needs. We need all the land we can get.?

This echoed a view shared by most members of Council, who argued the Town is not in the business of flipping land and that there are acute needs of sports groups that need to be addressed.

?Going in, when we chose to purchase, it was always going to be purchased for recreational,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?This change from industrial to recreational was known when we purchased the land and Council made that decision ? no different than when we acquired other pieces of land last term. We decided to purchase Mavrinac and, again, we did that for municipal purposes for the community benefit. The decision at that time was, no, we weren't going to flip the land and make a profit on it, we were buying that land for a goal and a purpose and it was for the community benefit. Yes, we could turn around and flip this land. ?There is a possibility to make a profit, but that is not why we're here. We're here to address the needs of the community and that is why we buy those lands.We're not looking to purchase and flip those lands; we're looking to purchase those lands to address the

shortfalls and needs of the community, especially our sports and rec. I have a hard time putting that into the equation about what the cost of it is because? regardless of whether it is going to be baseball fields or soccer fields, whatever it is, we were buying it for that purpose and if you want to do that kind of math, I don't think that is really genuine.?

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas: ?I wouldn't be in favour of [Machell Park] because I wouldn't want to take away from one organization and give to another. I don't think that makes sense. As far as selling the lands, if we sell these lands, yes, we would make a profit at this point but we would have to buy lands and the price has gone up to buy lands. We realistically wouldn't be making a profit; we would actually be losing a valuable piece of land that we could actually convert into sports fields and provide more services for our residents.?

Mayor Geoff Dawe echoed Councillor Thompson's sentiments, bringing the minds of Council back to the fight to secure lands on Mavrinac Boulevard for what is now Thomas Coates Park.

?If we were in the business of buying and selling, which I don't believe is the business a municipality should be in, we should have flipped Mavrinac,? said Mayor Dawe. ?We could have tripled our money, a developer would have bought it, they could have put all sorts of houses on there, and we would have made tax dollars that way. The Council of the day elected to make a park there, so obviously we have precedent for buying land and turning it into recreational property.?