

Meeting the needs of growing community comes into focus at final debate



By Brock Weir

Ensuring Aurora continues to meet the sport and recreation needs of a rapidly growing community came into sharp focus on Thursday night as Sport Aurora held its all-candidates debate.

Hosted at the Royal Canadian Legion, it was the last of three all-candidate sessions this election campaign following similar meetings facilitated by the Aurora Public Library and the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

Over the course of each election campaign, Sport Aurora, the organization which represents over 40 community sports clubs and groups, hosts a debate with sports and recreation being the key focus. This year, ensuring that all Aurorans have facilities that meet their needs was a thread woven throughout the night.

‘Aurora’s population is currently at 58,000 people and it is expected to grow to 90,000,’ said emcee Javed Khan in the second question of the evening. ‘At 58,000 residents, the demand for pools, fields and gym spaces is exceeding the supply. This issue will only compound as our population grows. As Mayor, what will you do to ensure our community has the facilities it needs to stay active at all ages and to deliver on the promise of becoming Canada’s most active community.’

Each mayoral candidate – John Abel, Chris Ballard, Geoff Dawe, and Tom Mrakas – had the opportunity to answer this question, each tackling the subject in their own way. A commonality in what each offered the over 150 people in attendance, however, was a pledge to collaborate with neighbouring municipalities and, in some cases, businesses, to meet these needs.

First up was incumbent Geoff Dawe who said work has been done this past Council term to improve and increase services.

‘We purchased the Hallmark Lands, as most people know, because we have a shortage of facilities. The Parks & Recreation Master Plan has identified a shortage of about 150 hectares or slightly over 300 acres of community park space, community needs space, and that is in our Official Plan of 2010,’ he said. ‘Our next Official Plan might change that number, but the reality is that if we do have a shortage of space, we have to not only hold onto the land that we have, we have to look at ways that we can obtain new land.’ A key land opportunity, he said, was provincially-held land near Cardinal Carter Catholic High School on Bloomington Road, a property the Town has been trying to secure for a number of years.

Mr. Dawe also cited a motion made over the outgoing term by Harold Kim to study a new multi-purpose recreation facility, ideally on the Bloomington land, for the decade ahead. Mr. Dawe said he and Aurora CAO Doug Nadorozny have been exploring partnership opportunities on just such a facility with King Township. King, in turn, has been in talks with Seneca College for the same purpose, he said.

‘We have been working much more closely with the school boards this year to use some of their facilities and they use our facilities, so if we have a project like [the artificial turf field at St. Max], that was a great opportunity for the Town to split the cost in a project which works for the school from 8 ? 4 and works for us from 4 until 9 and on the weekends,’ said Mr. Dawe. ‘It is a great opportunity to step back, look at some creative ways that we can put these projects together and ways that we can bring more efficiencies to our facilities and thereby provide a better level of service at a more effective cost to the residents.’

Next to tackle this issue was Mr. Mrakas, who said politicians and elected officials, ‘over time’ have become ‘short-sighted’ when they look at facilities, ‘looking at the ‘now’ instead of looking into the future’ decades down the road.

‘A perfect example is our shortfall on gymnasiums,’ he said. ‘We are currently in a deficit of three gymnasiums and that is by our

Master Plan. What I did is I actually put forward a motion this term to have that gymnasium built at the SARC, which was supposed to be built back when the SARC was built, when it was taken out of that plan. When I speak of the short-sightedness that gym was taken out at the time, it would have cost around \$2 million or \$2.5 million to build. Now, when we're going to look at building it now, it is going to cost us \$4 million. Because of that short-sightedness, it is going to cost the taxpayers more. When we look at building our future facilities, we need to look at how can we look to the future for future generations to make sure enough is there for them to be able to participate and have the opportunities to participate. I think that is what we're going to do moving forward and, as your mayor, that is what I will push for and make sure that this Council looks to the future and not just today.?

Mr. Ballard, on the other hand, said all candidates could agree that there aren't enough playing fields, nor is there enough built infrastructure, to meet current demands. More needs to be done, he said, to facilitate unstructured play.

?Council has known about a shortage of land for well over eight years and we haven't made enough progress in fulfilling that, but we also need to look beyond more land and more buildings,? he said. ?We need to get creative and we need to think outside of that proverbial box and figure out what can we do for kids who just want to go outside and play and parents who don't want to always have their kids driven somewhere? Again, not just children, all of us need to get out from behind the computers and TVs and move around some more, so what can we all do? What can the Town do to facilitate that? To help promote that type of healthy lifestyle? Yes, we need the buildings. A lot of these things should have been built many years ago. They haven't been. We should have deals in place already with Whitchurch-Stouffville, with King Township and Newmarket. We didn't. We need to do more of that.?

Last to tackle this question was Mr. Abel, who underscored his position in favour of repurposing existing facilities to address current and future demands. Repurposing is a plank of the Parks & Recreation Master Plan, he said, and a prime candidate for repurposing would be Machell Park to allow for a sports hub in Aurora's downtown core.

?We have to think Good Planning when we do make decisions,? he said. ?That includes sport tourism, and, of course, engaging our organizations is key. Partnering with educational schools, there is lots of land there. The new Bayview High School would be a perfect example. We should be involved there and say we would like to put in a gymnasium or maybe two.?

Noting at least two gymnasiums side by side would act as a driver for sports tourism, allowing for volleyball tournaments as just one example, he too touted the Bloomington lands as a prime opportunity.

?We have identified Bloomington lands, we have worked with the Province and we're at a standstill. I think we can do better, so we would acquire that, maybe put in two or three gyms along with many of the other facilities. It should be inclusive. We should analyse our demographics. Our seniors are now involved in pickleball, so there is a lot of research that needs to be done to make the proper decisions before we invest. We don't want to be hasty. These should all be taken into effect.?

?Good planning pays,? he concluded.