

Council looks beyond Sport Aurora for sports initiatives

By Brock Weir

Council could be looking beyond Sport Aurora for the delivery of sports programs this year, following the last Council meeting of 2018.

On a vote of 5 ? 2, Council chose not to extend the Sport Aurora Funding Agreement struck in the last term of Council for the development of the municipal Sports Plan, closing the deal on December 31. Come budget time, local lawmakers will be looking at a staff report on ?alternate delivery models for sport initiatives? going forward.

Staff recommended Council extend Sport Aurora's agreement with the Town with an upset limit of \$25,850 for the completion of the Year Three projects in the Sport Plan's four-year development goals, and the start of Year 4 programs including a review of sport leadership under the direction of a new Sport Council, addressing the accessibility of sport ? from women and girls in sport to persons with disabilities, from older adults to low-income residents to cultural barriers ? and the development of a sports tourism strategy.

Council, however, had different ideas and the first member to speak against the recommendation was Councillor Rachel Gilliland who suggested this nearly-\$26,000 request be reduced to \$10,000 for the next three months. Her reasoning, she said, was the initial request was based on a quarter of Sport Aurora's annual funding, but many of their high-profile activities happen in the fall.

?I do feel it is important to continue on with Sport Aurora while we have a transitional period [but] I don't think it would be in the best interests of the community to all of a sudden put a pause on Sport Aurora's initiatives as we transition over to a Sport Board or Sport Council. I would like to see them continue on with their duty to March 1 at a funding rate that is probably more applicable to their needs.?

Councillor John Gallo, on the other hand, brought a different perspective to the table, one that was shared with Mayor Tom Mrakas and others.

?I am not in favour of approving any funds prior to any budget discussions,? said Councillor Gallo. ?These are funds that we would be pre-approving prior to the 2019 Budget and, as a matter of principle, unless it is some essential service, unless the residents are going to be significantly impacted, I generally don't agree with that process. After reading quite a bit of material it didn't come across to me as an essential service. As it stands, my preference is to push pause and reassess and review the Sports Plan, Sports Council and allocate funds accordingly.?

After seeking assurances from Town Staff that Sport Aurora's programming components ? such as their Breakfast of Champions program and Volunteer Recognition activities ? would continue without this cash infusion, Mayor Mrakas echoed this view.

?I do think we need to take a pause and I think we do need to re-evaluate how we go about implementing the Sport Plan,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?The Sport Plan speaks to hiring a sport development officer, it speaks to creating a Sport Council or Sport Board and I think there has been some conversation that that is the direction we need to move to. I think that I am uncomfortable, as Councillor Gallo mentioned as well, that advancing an organization or user group when we're not sure whether we're going to move in that direction ? I think if we? have staff come back to us during budget, and we're only talking about two months away in February, and we can deal with how and what those options are and how we can move forward.

?For all we know, we could agree that Sport Aurora is the way we're going to go in regards to implementing that sport plan and for year four or five, or we could have those other options that say, ?you know what? We can do something different we believe will provide better value for our residents. At the end of the day, I think that's what we're all looking to do: provide the best possible service at the best possible price for our taxpayers and residents.?

A similar view was offered by Councillor Wendy Gaertner, tempered with a degree of caution.

?I certainly agree [on not] making any budget decisions outside the actual budget, unless it is essential,? she said. ?On the other hand, we have an initiative that has been going on for three years and they do have momentum. I wouldn't want to just stop that in its tracks.?

At the end of the day, however, Councillor Gallo said he just didn't see a clear message of what was being achieved with regards to the Sports Plan. The funding lines, he said were blurred between the funding for the Sports Plan and monies set aside for other initiatives under the Sport Aurora umbrella, including Activate Aurora.

?To me, there are quite a few gaps that I am not satisfied with and that's an additional reason I want to push pause and make sure we're following up with our agreements and that the money that we spend, the taxpayer's monies, that we're getting the best bang for our buck,? he concluded.