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Athletes slide into new home on former Hallmark lands

Local baseball and softball players will have more opportunities to play close to home following the opening of a new sports hub on the former Hallmark lands.

Located on Industrial Parkway South between Engelhard Drive and Vandorf Sideroad, the two softball diamonds, along with associated washrooms, shade structure, and parking lot were formally dedicated by Mayor and Council on the evening of September 13.

Approved by the 2018-2022 term of Council, what to build on the Hallmark lands was subject to lengthy debates at Town Hall with user groups and politicians alike presenting differing views on how the land would best benefit local sports communities.

Two softball diamonds, however, ultimately won the day and area teams had nearly two weeks to break them in before the formal dedication.

?Aurora King Minor Baseball was instrumental in moving this project forward and giving us some direction as to how to address their needs,? says Al Downey, Director of Operations for the Town of Aurora. ?The ball diamonds are modified in order to maximize use by as many user groups as possible, so even though they are ball diamonds, the infield will accommodate both softball as well as baseball. The Aurora Diggers [women's softball team] is on there, softball leagues are on that diamond as well. The design is maximized opportunity for permitting and use by as many groups as possible.?

The addition of these diamonds into the Town's roster of recreation facilities ?now provides an opportunity for youth that are in Aurora to play in Aurora and that's always been the goal: to provide an opportunity,? Mr. Downey added.

?There's always a constant foundation with regards to baseball use, but now that the Jays are doing well, there's increased interest and you'll find that there's even more kids coming out and playing ball. These diamonds will go a long way in addressing their needs.?

While teams get their feel of the new facilities, the Town is looking at how they will be used to see if they might be suitable for ?alternative uses? as well.

?It's a beautiful piece of land,? says Mr. Downey. ?It's got ample greenspace with it as well, in addition to the diamonds themselves, a beautiful washroom, changeroom [and] as the park goes up and people come to it, we're probably going to be finding other uses for it, but right now that's not on the table or even part of the discussion, only because it's still pretty unfamiliar to people and I think

next season will then start spurring some of those conversations.?

Construction for the new ball facility began in April of 2021 and was supposed to open this past May, but supply chain issues, challenges related to grading and hydro, and lingering questions related to the global pandemic resulted in a delay of approximately four months.

Despite this, Mr. Downey says the project came in under-budget.

?This was really good work between Council, staff, and user groups, supported by documentation within our Parks & Recreation Master Plan and even though there was a lot of debate, and sometimes it seemed to go on for some time, I think at the end of the day people are very happy we got to this point,? he says. ?We're at this point together and I think it is going to bode extremely well for the future of youth in Aurora, baseball and softball in particular, and it certainly does set us a good framework on how we should engage the community and move forward with facility development.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter