

Aurora delays indoor tennis plans to seek more options

By Brock Weir

Aurora's tennis players hoping to have a warm place to play tennis during the long winter months will have a while to wait yet as Council last week put the brakes on a potential tennis dome at Stewart Burnett Park.

Councillors voted in favour of referring the matter back to staff for more options after a push came at the Council table to move away from the tennis dome supported by staff in favour of investigating a fixed structure which could, in turn, be used for many different sports and activities.

Some Councillors, however, said a delay was needless and could ultimately cost taxpayers more money.

Councillors initially voted in favour of moving ahead with a six court tennis dome at the Committee level the previous week. That proposal would see Canada Winter Tennis, a company associated with Terry Redvers, owner of the Aurora Sports Dome, construct a tennis dome on municipal land at his own cost for a 20 year term which would subsequently become the property of the Town.

"The land that this facility is to be placed on is land that would not otherwise be used," said Councillor Evelyn Buck, supporting the dome proposal.

Some, however, hesitated going forward with this plan, saying they believed the terms of reference put out by the Town last fall for expressions of interest in providing an indoor tennis facility were too narrow to meet the Town's needs.

"We don't have any research that says we need six more tennis courts in Aurora," said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. "To the end of 2013, we need to add one more [through the Master Parks and Recreation Plan] and we did that. Six seems like a lot of courts. Maybe we need them and maybe we don't. Everyone around this table knows we don't have a lot of vacant land for recreational purposes [and building multiuse facilities] makes the best use of your land and your tax money and you're thinking towards the future."

Councillor John Gallo, a key proponent of an original proposal of a multi-use tennis facility at Fleury Park first proposed by the Aurora Community Tennis Club in 2012, disagreed with Councillor Gaertner about the need for a facility. A tennis "bubble", however, just wasn't going to cut it "particularly considering the millions of dollars Aurora has already spent on the nearby Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex and ball diamond in the adjacent park.

"I believe that a bubble at this location with a trailer connected to it for changing rooms and for washrooms is completely substandard [next to the SARC]. To put this type of facility there seems below the level I believe we could accomplish," said Councillor Gallo, citing the impending closure of Timberlane as exacerbating the need. "What I envision is a report with options on a structure there. I don't see the need to rush into this, but there is a desperate need for an indoor tennis facility. I think we are rushing into it and need to press pause and look at some different options.

"I think we would be doing a disservice to this community [if we] plowed through this without thinking it through properly."

In response, Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, said he had no problem with going back to the drawing board and coming up with an option for a rigid structure, but said Council needs to narrow its focus on what exactly they envision for a multi-purpose structure so there is a clear message to send out to possible proponents in the tennis community looking to follow through with the plans.

Others, however, weren't as particular about the aesthetics "preferring function (and cost) over form.

"Function is extremely important and costs are extremely important," said Councillor Paul Pirri. "It might not be the same aesthetic value, and I don't disagree that that is important to some people, but if you look at what it does, if people need a place they can play

tennis in the winter, this meets that need. If we're looking at costs, we have a very clear known cost with what we have in front of us.?

Going back to the drawing board, expanding the scope of the project for a multi-purpose structure, would present a lot of unknowns which would require partnerships and the need to raise more money.

?This serves the need in the most cost-efficient manner,? said Councillor Paul Pirri. ?I don't see why we would be looking at doing something else.?

Councillor John Abel said he agreed.

?What is great about this is it is not going to cost the Town any money apart from the land,? he said. ?I sure do like the fact we're not going to spend any money and it is going to be operated by someone else.?

Nevertheless, Councillors voted 5 ? 4 in favour of looking at further options. Supporting the motion were Councillors Abel, Ballard, Gaertner, Gallo, and Humfries. For Councillor Chris Ballard, it was a matter of interest to see the other options out there, although he didn't want the concept to ?grow and grow and grow?.

?We have to keep it within our means, so I am very comfortable to take it back to staff [for] more information? perhaps with some use for other venues like theatres, movies, and a community meeting space,? he said. ?I don't think we require any more indoor soccer space, so I am comfortable keeping things small and modest.?

For those voting against the plan, it was an opportunity missed which resulted in Council ?accomplishing nothing.?

?The ultimate persuasion for me is it wasn't going to cost the taxpayers' anything [and] we would be adding an amenity for the town,? said Councillor Buck, noting her disagreement with a proposal for a rigid structure from Sport Star which would have required Aurora to act as guarantor for their construction loan. ?That does not interest me at all. If they fail to make the payments, the Town is responsible for that mortgage, whatever that might be, and we have no idea what such a fixed structure would cost.?