

Council aims to get creative with new park sites amid shortfall

Amid a shortfall of parkland in Aurora, Council is pursuing some creative ways to close some gaps.

One such initiative will be to look at parkland acquisition in Aurora's south end, following an unanimously approved motion brought forward this month by Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson.

Councillor Thompson's motion calls on staff to 'identify and investigate properties of interest' in the Town's OPA 34 Secondary Plan area (Yonge Street South) and report back to Council on options.

'Parks are an essential public infrastructure and are vital to improving and sustaining the health of individuals, the community, environment and economy,' said Councillor Thompson in his motion. 'Aurora residents place a high value on the Town's park system' 92 per cent of survey respondents for the 2023 Parks and Recreation Master Plan indicated that parks for casual use are important to them and the Town's 2023 Draft Official Plan identifies the establishment of a diverse parkland and recreation system as a fundamental principle of the Plan.

'Playgrounds and neighbourhood amenities that support childhood development and foster cognitive development and social skills, and encourage physical activity. Playgrounds should be provided in new and existing residential areas where geographic gaps exist, generally calculated through application of a 500-metre service radius that is unobstructed by major pedestrian barriers.'

The OPA 34 Secondary Plan Area, he noted is 'underserved by both parkland and playgrounds.'

'In the past 20 years, 550 homes have been built within the OPA 34 Secondary Plan area and \$9.2 million has been collected in cash-in-lieu of parkland,' said Councillor Thompson, concluding his motion.

Speaking at the table at the final Council meeting before summer resources, he reiterated these points, adding that all of Council recognizes the playground shortfall.

'There have been a number of developments over the years [in Yonge Street South] and because a lot of the developments were smaller in scale, the decision was to take cash-in-lieu as opposed to bringing parkland,' he said. 'I am just asking staff to simply come back with a report, they identify and investigate some possibilities, and we'll go from there in terms of what Council may or may not want to do; but I think it has been a long time since we have taken a look at that area of what may or may not be feasible and it would be good to update the information' so we can look at potential strategies to address the shortfalls in the area.'

Under current rules set by the Province of Ontario, municipalities like Aurora can levy a standard rate of five per cent of developable residential lands 'or cash-in-lieu' or two per cent of commercial and industrial lands, 'or an alternative rate of up to one hectare of land for every 1,000 units when requiring cash-in-lieu of land,' according to the recently refreshed Parks & Recreation Master Plan.

Recent caps from the Province have limited what municipalities can require to 10 per cent of land or its value for sites under five hectares, and 15 per cent for sites greater than five hectares.

'These changes will result in reductions to parkland dedication and cash-in-lieu requirements compared to the previous legislation, especially for areas of higher density,' reads the plan. 'One of the reasons for these changes is that previous parkland requirements had the potential to consume most or all of the development site (particularly for very high-density developments), impacting the viability of the development. Additionally, the provincial mandate to increase housing supply has led to parkland dedication exemptions for affordable residential units (also exempted in the Town's draft Official Plan), attainable residential units, inclusionary zoning residential units, non-profit housing, and additional unit developments.'

'Striking an appropriate balance across the Town's urban structure is vital, including the Aurora Promenade, MTSA (Major Transit

Station Area), and key corridors. However, planning, designing and maintaining parks in densely populated areas presents several new challenges, including smaller parkland blocks that are used more intensely and are thus more costly to construct and maintain. Given the scarcity and higher cost of land in these areas, new approaches are required to both acquire suitable land for parks and to program these parks to meet a unique range of needs, such as privately-owned public spaces (POPS), strata parks (e.g. on top of a parking garage, utility, etc.) and/or naturalized lands (such as lands in the Oak Ridges Moraine). The Town's draft Official Plan includes policies that permit each of these options based on their merits.?

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