

Council approves significant price hike on Thelma Fielding Park amid questions over process

Aurora Council last week approved the final park design and budget for the construction of a new community park in the northwest quadrant of St. John's Sideroad and Yonge Street.

Dubbed Thelma Fielding Park, the new space will include a new artificial turf field constructed in partnership between the Town of Aurora, St. Anne's School, and Shining Hill Developments, along with courts for basketball and pickleball, a splashpad, playground and more.

As The Auroran reported last week, however, the park development has seen a significant price tag increase of more than \$2.5 million since it was first approved by Council.

Concern over the rising costs dominated Council's debate on April 23, with Councillors questioning not only the cost, but also an increase in contingency funds to ensure it comes to fruition.

"Inflation is one thing and we're struggling with inflation, but not in the order of 50 per cent," said Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese before asking staff for detail on what led to the price hike.

Among the elements that caused prices to rise were detailed design work, "numerous consultants," a washroom facility coming in "well over estimated value" from the consultant by more than \$500,000, additional lighting for the multi-use court, rubberized surfacing for the playground to enhance accessibility, fencing and more, said Parks Manager Sarah Tienkamp.

Tienkamp noted, however, that her department spoke to other municipalities and the revised figures are "in line" with current market value.

Despite his support for the project in principle, Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo said he saw "a lot of red flags" with what was presented to Council.

He objected to making a Council decision worth \$2.6 million directly at a Council meeting rather than it coming to debate at a Committee of the Whole meeting for debate ahead of the final decision.

"We have a \$2.6 million overbudget coming straight to Council. The public had four days, five max, two of which are weekends, to even review this and this is the first result of a new and, in my opinion, ridiculous meeting regime that you, Mr. Mayor, have implemented," he said, referring to a recent decision by Mayor Tom Mrakas to remove two General Committee meetings from the Council schedule in favour of one Committee of the Whole meeting ahead of Council.

Mayor Mrakas, on his part, disputed this and said he wanted to bring the matter to a Special Committee meeting the previous week but the report was not ready.

Nevertheless, this was just one of the concerns voiced by Councillor Gallo.

The overages, he contended, should be revisited last fall during the 2024 Budget process, and he also questioned the procurement process and how the winning bidder was chosen, but could not press further as the bids are not public.

He also questioned the staff recommendation to increase the contingency funds from \$10 million to \$15 million.

Here, he was joined by Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson who said he would rather keep the contingency fund as is and leave any further increases for future Council approval, if required.

The two other funding partners were supportive of this approach (to increase contingency last week) because of the unknowns, said Aurora CAO Doug Nadorozny, with such unknowns being soil conditions on-site and what might need to be removed from beneath the surface due to the previous use of the site.

If the added expense comes up in July or August, we have the added complication of trying to get a Council meeting. It would potentially have to be a Special Meeting just for that subject and we are trying to have the field completed and usable for the next school year in September. So, while we could do as Councillor Thompson has suggested, it does add a little bit of risk to the completion in September (for the start of the school year), Nadorozny continued, insisting it was a proactive recommendation.

Councillor Thompson put forward a motion for any further contingency boosts to the project come with specific Council approval, a motion which was approved on a vote of 6 to 0, with Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland not participating in the discussion or vote due to having a family member employed by St. Anne's.

I am not too worried about the timing, said Councillor Thompson. I would put forward an amendment that Council approval is required to exceed whatever that amount is of the 10 per cent contingency. Should it happen, staff will come back to Council and they would explain to members of Council and the public, if necessary, what has been the issue driving the spending for the contingency account, what the change orders are, and why they need the additional funds.

Although we are approving the budget authority on Council, we understand that if the project is under-budget, that money just gets returned back to reserves anyway. We're just restricting that last piece of the contingency, which I think achieves the same thing as changing the budget authority.

The overall price increase for the completion of Thelma Fielding Park was approved by Council on a vote of 4 to 2 with Mayor Mrakas, Councillor Weese, Councillor Thompson and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim in the affirmative. Voting against were Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner and Councillor Gallo, with, as noted, Councillor Gilliland absent from the discussion.

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