

Decision on Hallmark lands delayed until June 12

By Brock Weir

Two baseball diamonds, two soccer fields or a combination thereof ? whichever way the wind blows on what will be built on Aurora's Hallmark lands, local sports groups will have to wait a little bit longer to find out.

Council last week deferred the decision on whether to build two baseball diamonds, two soccer fields, or one of each, on the 13 acre parcel of land at Vandorf Road and Industrial Parkway South until the next Council meeting after recommendations failed on a tie-vote of 4-4.

A move to proceed with a staff recommendation to build two diamonds on the land split Council and it was hoped a delay until the next meeting on June 12 would allow Councillor Paul Pirri, absent from the table last week, to be the tiebreaker.

Tuesday's discussion was a less heated affair than the previous week's General Committee meeting, at which it was suggested by Councillor John Abel that the Hallmark lands be flipped for a profit and the money spent to expand sports and recreation facilities elsewhere. Instead, the meeting largely focused on what will be built on the land itself.

Despite staff recommendations to proceed with the two diamonds, which would, they said, address a significant shortfall in diamond time for local baseball clubs, delegations to Council provided alternative visions ? as did Council.

?During this process, I have talked to many members from all organizations, some of the executives as well, and they have put forward some compelling arguments and some compelling cases for what they believe is in the best interests not only of their organization, but the community as a whole,? said Councillor Tom Mrakas, kicking off the evening's discussion, before turning his attention to Aurora's most recent Parks & Recreation Master Plan, which calls for one additional baseball diamond.

?We put enough time, effort and resources, tax dollars, into creating that document and, to me, there isn't a compelling enough argument to deviate from that vision this Town, the residents, have created. To me, when I look at these lands, I see it as it should be one baseball diamond and one [multiuse] rectangular field?because I think we need to maximize the usage we can get out of it.?

A similar view was shared by Councillor Jeff Thom, who said focus should be on building like-facilities ? three baseball diamonds, three soccer fields, etc. ? closer together to allow tournament play.

This was, however, not a viewpoint shared by the vast majority of Council.

Throughout the debate, other options were considered, including building a second baseball diamond in parks near the Aurora Community Centre. This, however, would mean the loss of a well-used soccer field already on site, staff cautioned.

Another option put on the table was going with a ?one and one? option on the Hallmark lands pursuing facility partnerships with the York Catholic District School Board on fields at Cardinal Carter, as well as continuing to pressure the Province to build sports facilities on vacant land on Bloomington Road.

But these are options very much down the road, argued some Councillors, and there is no certainty with either of these options.

Some even saw a ?one and one? as a compromise ? one that compromises the needs of local sports groups.

?We have talked about the Bloomington lands since 2011,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?As much as we have advocated for those lands, they are still held up by the Province, but I believe that sooner rather than later we will have an opportunity to acquire them. The vision has always been a complex there with multisport fields, sort of a Centre of Excellence, and I believe that is the vision of Council [and staff]. I don't necessarily want to compromise on the Hallmark lands because I see an opportunity to find an optimal solution for soccer, baseball and other sports.?

For Councillor John Abel, who was in the hot seat the previous week over this issue, more information was needed to make sure the Town exercises the best option. An inventory of land is needed, he said, to outline all land opportunities, including opportunities to build fields on floodplain areas.

Staff, however, stated that building on the Moraine and in floodplain areas need to be cleared by the Province, and they are still awaiting traction from Queen's Park on that front.

?There are great positive ideas of considering that as an option and considering where the potential is for all the fields,? said Councillor Abel. ?We could get input from all our groups and we might be able to understand better what we have and how we will go about and strategize. We should move back on the recommendation and get a full detail of all these matters. There are lands available. We don't want to talk about it. We're in a rush to make a decision and we have to make the best decision going forward. I would like to evaluate all those and I think a good steering committee with a strategy is exactly what we need for long-term vision. I can't support two ball diamonds there. I am not opposed to using the Hallmark lands, but I would like to be able to evaluate what other options there are to make that decision.?

Yet, many local lawmakers viewed the Hallmark lands ? be it two diamonds, fields, or a mix ? as the best option available at this time.

?We have a responsibility as a Council and Town to serve the needs of our residents, to keep our residents healthy and active, so we bought the Hallmark lands,? said Councillor Wendy Gaertner, throwing her support behind a one-and-one option. ?Now the next thing is we're talking about maybe buying Bloomington or other lands. There is no assurance we're going to be able to buy that land. It is not a done deal. It is not even? Who knows? We're dealing with the government. Who knows what they're going to say.? Added Councillor Mrakas: ?As Councillor Gaertner pointed out, we don't actually have any other land and so, at the end of the day, we need to make a decision and move forward without just making promises; we have to make commitments. We can't make a commitment if we don't own the land.?