

Disc Golf could have future in Highland Gate community ? if residents agree

If you have good aim, want to get a bit of exercise, and want to maintain social distancing, disc golf might be the sport for you ? and it might be coming to Aurora if residents give it the green light.

Meeting at the Committee level last week, Council considered a proposal for a nine-hole disc golf course, in a future park earmarked for the Highland Gate community, as part of the 2023 Capital Budget.

A disc golf course for Aurora was first proposed last year at Council by proponents of the sport.

Using a frisbee-like disc, the object of the game is to fire the disc into a ?hole? (more like a cone on a pedestal).

It was floated as a fun and safe recreational opportunity in light of the global pandemic and received the tentative support of Council.

What has proved more divisive, however, is the suggested location, with ratepayers in the Highland Gate community expressing some concerns about the sport coming to their backyards.

?The investment into a disc golf course goes beyond finding a piece of land and building the course as there are several other factors that will contribute to whether a course is used frequently by the community,? said Erin Hamilton, Sport & Community Development Specialist for the Town of Aurora in her report to Council, which recommended the nine-hole course in the Highland Gate community be included in the 2023 Capital Budget.

Among the considerations outlined by Ms. Hamilton were proper signage, marketing and ensuring there is a buy-in for the community.

?Building community awareness and sufficient education about the sport and course can positively impact usage rates,? she continued. ?Some communities engaged through research have not invested in any promotion of the disc golf course which has resulted in low usage rates. Knowledge of the disc golf course has been based on word-of-mouth. A well-planned and executed communications campaign through Town channels can increase awareness and interest to reach more of the community. Furthermore, opportunities to educate the community through try-it sessions where they are provided information about disc golf and taught some basic skills can encourage usage.?

But community buy-in could already be a stumbling block in seeing disc golf brought to fruition in Aurora.

Staff recommend future parklands in the Highland Gate community as the preferred location if a course is duly approved by Council. Other locations considered were the Aurora Community Arboretum and the associated Lambert Willson Park, but those were taken out of the running because making way for the park would displace naturalized areas in those green spaces.

While Ms. Hamilton noted adding a disc golf course as an amenity is an idea that would need to be presented to the Highland Gate Ratepayers, Councillors said last week that those residents are already making their positions clear.

?Some residents from Highland Gate have been in communication with Council [this week] and they have some concerns,? said Councillor Rachel Gilliland. ?In the resolution, it does say [staff] will be in discussion with them, so I would like to see that continue.?

So too would Councillor John Gallo who said he couldn't be supportive of moving forward without further input from the residents.

?We have already had some correspondence from that community saying they haven't been contacted,? he said. ?We can move it

forward, but not until we have significant communication with that community that would be most impacted by this.?

Councillor Gallo put forward an amendment to the motion before them to ensure that Highland Gate only be selected as the preferred location ?subject to additional consultation with ratepayers,? a move that was supported by Council.

Outside of the location, how a potential disc golf course might be costed and operated was also subject to debate, as was determining a need for the sport outside of the pending update to Aurora's Master Recreation Plan.

?The majority of models that existed across the Province were municipally owned and operated,? said Robin McDougall, Aurora's Director of Community Services. ?There are some private facilities, but for the most part, when you go in the direction of a private facility, generally they charge a fee. If we're looking at opportunities and the recommendations put forward with regards to it being municipally-owned and operated, it would allow for us to move in a direction where it would be a playground-style?and it would allow us to provide access to a recreational activity that would be no cost to residents versus a private facility.?

But Council pressed on to make sure there was a demand.

?I think since we're doing this Master Plan in 2022, it would make sense to wait until we do a review to see if that is something that is of demand in the community,? said Councillor Gilliland. ?As we all know, we do lack space for various fields and other things. Maybe through this we will discover that pickleball or cricket, or some other kind of sport, might be something engaging.?

Added Councillor Michael Thompson: ?I would be a little bit more comfortable understanding the operating model if I had a better understanding of what the operating costs would be. It says within the report that the municipality would take on the full responsibility of building and maintaining?the course [but] there is reference to the capital cost of building it? and no implications with respect to what the ongoing costs would be.?

Staff responded that the ongoing costs ? such as grass cutting ? would be contingent on the site that is selected, along with the number of holes a course might have, but Council agreed more information was needed.

?From what I know of Aurora, we don't have many land areas that would accommodate disc golf, especially nine holes, and I think the Highland Gate property is the only place we can accommodate it,? said Councillor Gaertner. ?The Highland Gate residents have been through so much with the redevelopment of the property and it really would be respectful to discuss this with them first before we do anything further.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter