

Indoor tennis players get their bubble

By Brock Weir

Aurora tennis enthusiasts have lobbed several balls in Council's direction calling for an indoor tennis facility and on Tuesday night it was Council's turn to return the serve.

Councillors signed off on a deal which will transform a corner of Stewart Burnett Park, just behind the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex (SARC) on Wellington Street East, into a year-round tennis bubble.

Calls for an indoor tennis facility in Aurora are not new. In the last term of Council, the Aurora Community Tennis Club approached Council on building a multipurpose facility at Fleury Park, an idea which was shot down in short order by the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority, while plans for a cost-neutral bubble in lieu of this proposed 'Fleury Ploughhouse' were popped at the eleventh hour in favour of taking a second look at a multipurpose facility.

Calls for an indoor tennis facility intensified following the closure of Timberlane Athletic Club at the end of last year and now Council is back at the bubble.

Last week, approved a 20-year lease deal with Canada Winter Tennis at the committee level. Now that the deal has been authorized by Council, the company enter into a lease payment agreement with Aurora for \$9,000 per year, plus 3 per cent annual inflation for the term of the deal, or \$241,833.

The initial approval was greeted by applause from tennis enthusiasts filling Council chambers and for them, and some Councillors, the deal was a long time coming.

'Not much has changed [since 2013],' said Mayor Geoff Dawe at the time. 'I think we need to move ahead. I think what most people in the audience are interested in, and certainly what I am interested in, is moving forward.'

This sentiment was echoed by Councillor Tom Mrakas.

'This should have been done a long time ago,' he said. 'We're going to be providing a service that is needed and is not costing the taxpayers any money. I don't see what the issues would be moving forward.'

One issue, noted Councillor John Abel, is the location.

Councillor Abel said tying up 'valuable' parks and recreation land behind the SARC was worth a re-think. Rather than having a bubble up here all year round, a more viable option, he argued, would be to throw a seasonal bubble over existing tennis courts at Fleury Park.

'We could use that valuable asset of land for what our Master Plan says, what our Sport Tourism Plan says, and that is a multi-purpose facility that could [house] tennis courts, volleyball courts, indoor tracks, indoor soccer, badminton and all those things,' he said. 'We have asked six times for a multipurpose facility for Council to consider as an option and we still haven't got that. We could put a bubble on the Hallmark lands, we could put it on Mavrinac. I do not know why we would let this very strategic, valuable piece of land at the SARC be occupied by a bubble.'

Land behind and adjacent to the SARC were once earmarked as possible expansion opportunities for the facility, including additional ice pads, but neither the existing Parks and Recreation Master Plan, or the updated draft up for Council approval this month cite any need for further ice pads, noted Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation.

Nevertheless, Councillor Abel's concerns were shared by Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who seconded his failed motion to look at a bubble at Fleury Park and a multipurpose facility at the SARC.

?To tie up our very valuable and small amount of rec land for 20 years with a bubble at the SARC doesn't make sense to the community,? she said. ?There is no doubt we have to help the tennis community, but this proposal doesn't make sense to me.?

Councillor Harold Kim agreed that the SARC is not the ideal location, but it is the best option at this time to give the tennis community what they want in a reasonable timeframe.

Other Councillors remained steadfast in their support.

?Councillor Abel's new idea [for Fleury Park], where are we going to get the money from?? asked Councillor Pirri. ?The last thing I would want to do is spend money like a drunken sailor. We don't know where the funds are coming from. We have an option to provide something that is very much needed. Council, as a whole, turned that down last term. I disagreed with the decision then and I disagree with it now. We need to move forward on building something that meets the needs of our residents today and in the future. A tennis bubble will do that.

?It makes the Town money, as opposed to costing us a penny. It was a no-brainer then, it is a no-brainer now. We need to move forward with this.?

In the end, Councillor Gaertner was won over.

?I don't know if I am going to want to rehash this at Council, I see the will of the table,? she said. ?I want the residents to be happy so, at the end of the day, I will be voting in favour of it.?