

?Set aside emotion? in making the right decision, urge delegates on Hallmark lands

By Brock Weir

Aurora's soccer and baseball communities once again made their respective pitches to Council last week over use of the Hallmark Lands, but fresh voices urged Council to take emotion out of the equation when looking at options to address significant shortfalls when it comes to local sports fields.

Martin Ambrose, representing the Aurora soccer community and Jamie Cole, representing baseball in Aurora and King reiterated their positions that Aurora would be best served by two soccer fields and two baseball diamonds respectively.

?Development of the Hallmark lands neglects our needs,? said Mr. Ambrose of municipal staff's recommendation to greenlight two baseball diamonds on the 13 acre land parcel.

Addressing recommendations coming out of the Town's Parks & Recreation Advisory Committee, Mr. Ambrose stressed that this vote did not reflect the needs of the local soccer community. Sport Aurora has a spot at the table, he said, soccer does not, and he requested that this imbalance be rectified.

Sport Aurora's position, on the other hand, was represented at the table by Sandra Manherz, a board member, who took to the podium for the first time on the organization's behalf.

In her delegation, she said Sport Aurora was bringing an ?objective lens? to the discussion, representing a ?larger view and advocating for what we truly believe to be in the best interests of sports and recreation in the community.?

?This particular issue is an emotional one for the Aurora Sports and Rec community,? she said. ?We are lacking facilities in all areas. As our population grows to 90,000, the situation will only worsen. Sporting organizations across this town, whether field, diamond, pool or rink are struggling to grow their programs. Kids and adults alike are heeding the call for Aurora to become Canada's most active community, but despite these individuals lining up to participate, we are turning them away.

?To attempt to fix this, our sporting organizations have become passionate advocates, and so they should be, fighting for their communities. While this is also true for me, I am an individual who is very analytical in nature. I value logic and rational process and why I am challenging Council to do today is to pull the emotion out of this debate and look purely at the facts.?

These facts, she claimed, hinged on sports tourism. Developing the Hallmark lands is a perfect opportunity to foster just that, she said, but with two diamonds.

Building just one diamond ? which Council ultimately opted to do, alongside one full-size senior soccer pitch ? ?undermines? the vision for sports tourism and sets it back ?at least five years, if not longer? due to a lack of other suitable land alternatives.

?Leaders should inspire others to dream more, do more and achieve more,? she said. ?We shouldn't be compromising. We should be visionaries who see the big picture of where we want Aurora to be in 10 or 20 years and we shouldn't hope it happens, we should make it happen. One field and one diamond sabotages the long-term vision for sport and rec here in town. It takes sports tourism and cuts it off at the knees. It takes the vision of a 20-year Aurora and makes it a one-year piecemeal projects that we hope fit together in the end.

?I implore you to set aside emotion, to set aside what the political issues organizations deal with every day and focus on the facts and the vision. If you do that, there is only one decision here today and that is in favour of sport tourism and two diamonds on Hallmark and being bold, stay the course and be the visionaries we need.?

But, this was just one perspective in the room.

A very different perspective was added by Anna Bisogno-Coutts.

She agreed that the debate over the future use of the Hallmark lands was pitting two sports groups against each other, and said she hoped there was a resolution on the table ?that makes everyone happy.?

?Our kids deserve to play whatever sport they want to play in this town,? she said. ?As a taxpayer and a resident of this town, I would expect that Council would do what is fiscally responsible. I wouldn't want to be digging deep into my pockets for more money. I am a soccer coach and have been for 14 years and my kids play soccer, so it is difficult for me to play both sides, but I have to give you both points of view.?

One point of view she offered was one floated last month by former Aurora councillor John Gallo to sell the Hallmark lands at a profit and use the profit to invest in sports facilities elsewhere, including the repurposing of existing fields to meet current demands. This was an option embraced as well by Councillor John Abel, and by Ms. Bisogno-Coutts as well.

She dismissed suggestions made by Ms. Manherz that a quick solution could be found by the Town partnering with the York Region

District School Board on existing soccer fields at Aurora High School and Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School as something that would take a lot of work to make possible.

Instead, money from Hallmark should be made to retrofit lands like Machell Park.

?There are options, is all I am saying, and we should actually be fiscally responsible here, use the funds from the Hallmark lands to give everybody what they need, and put this to rest and let's hear what you have for us in the next few months coming up to the election: other platforms and things we really need in this Town because I see that financially things are going to change for everybody in the next few years,? she said. ?Don't make us dig into our pockets for more money. Let's look what we have, let's make both clubs happy.

?We're not to make a profit, but it worked out that way. It just worked out that the lands have added value now and that there is a need and we're not flipping, we're just translating; we're taking funds from here and translating them into providing community services. We're not pocketing money?it is for the community and I don't see that as flipping, I see that as making good use of taxpayer money.?