

Sports group make their pitches for land space, put ball in Council's court

By Brock Weir

Sports groups have had a healthy match with members of Aurora Council on the future of land space, but while they cool their heels waiting for a victor to be declared, potentially as early as this week, they can be content with putting up a good fight. Local clubs came out in droves to make their respective pitches on how Council should allocate the 13-acre parcel known as the Hallmark lands for sports and recreation uses.

On the floor was a staff recommendation to build two senior baseball diamonds on the lands to meet exploding user needs from local sports clubs, but first to step up to the plate was Martin Ambrose of the Aurora Soccer Club.

Mr. Andrews stepped up and delivered a clear message to local lawmakers: baseball diamonds simply don't meet their needs. Aurora's most recent Parks & Recreation Master Plan, he said, supports the need for both baseball diamond and rectangular sports fields and questioned why 'priorities' had changed once recommendations for the Hallmark lands came forward.

'There should be no winners or losers, but maybe some healthy compromise,' said Mr. Ambrose. 'As adult soccer players see it, we made our needs known in December of 2017, and again in March of 2018. Our membership continues to ask me and the Board [why this appears] to be a done deal.'

Mr. Ambrose provided his own statistics to Council and municipal staff alike to illustrate the need, arguing that the existing five fully-lit rectangular fields in Aurora breaks down into one lit field for every 1,059 players in Aurora. There are eight lit softball diamonds, he said, representing one diamond for every 278 players.

Reflecting on Aurora's most recent Parks, Recreation & Culture Advisory Committee (PRAC), Mr. Ambrose said while baseball and youth soccer stated their cases 'briefly and eloquently,' he only spoke as a member of the public. Sport Aurora, he added, does not represent the Aurora Soccer Club, and PRAC's unanimous decision is not reflective of the entire sports community.

'My understanding is Committee recommendations are not binding on the Town unless adopted by Council,' he continued. 'We at the ASC want to help you and our fellow recreation users create a win-win scenario. We have always been open to dialogue. I request that Council direct staff include at least one soccer field with floodlights in the project design and approval. In addition, we request that soccer be provided with its own representation on the PRAC committee.'

'I can't delegate out of both sides of my mouth. I'm here for soccer. I respect the stress you're under to try and figure this all out. It is pretty obvious. It is not an easy call that you have. We have the demand, there seems to be a decision that's made that we move that to recreational fields. We believe we should be sitting on one of those slots on that field as a minimum. Beyond that, I continue to recommend we should look outside of Town to get our hands on [playing land].'

Following Mr. Ambrose at the podium was Reg Chappell, representing Sport Aurora.

The Hallmark land, he said, is one example of 'many conflicts that are on the horizon' as Aurora inches towards a population of 90,000 and grapples with meeting the needs of a future demand.

'Sport Aurora believes we need a plan and a process to grow a healthy community, one that the next generation of Councillors cannot easily change based on the political wind,' said Mr. Chappell. 'Aurora needs a balance between business and healthy, active community. Unfortunately, over many previous Councils, we are lacking sufficient property for recreation and sport purposes. Children need to be taught about health, physical literacy and encouraged to be active.'

'If Council indeed wants Aurora to be Canada's most active community, we believe that healthy and active community attracts residents and businesses and has to grow its capacity to do so. The issue before you tonight is land and what to do with that land. We repurpose lands as needs change, but this is not a solution. Waiting to buy land later [as costs] escalate is just poor business. The Hallmark land purchase has the support of all people who care about a healthy, active community and the members of Sport Aurora applaud you for that. The Council, in their wisdom, has approved a sport plan. Together, we should be building and implementing our sport plan. The most experienced sport experts are among the 40 sport Aurora member organizations. These members have proven they can work together for the common good of the community.'