

Tennis Dome set to move forward amid calls for broader project

By Brock Weir

A proposed six court tennis dome in east Aurora could take a significant step forward this week, pending a Council vote.

Councillors are due to sign off on the first phase of a plan which could lead to Aurora partnering with Canada Winter Tennis, a group brought together by Terry Redvers, owner of the Aurora Sports Dome, for a domed tennis facility at Stuart Burnett Park, adjacent to the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex.

While Canada Winter Tennis was the winning bidder among three companies responding to a request for proposals for tennis courts, debate will go forward this week deciding whether this is a facility Aurora needs.

Canada Winter Tennis proposes a six court air-supported dome for a 20 year lease with the Town with a 15-year renewal. They plan to finance the entire project and go on to offer a lease payment of \$9,000 to the Town annually pegged at an annual inflation rate at three per cent.

The plan to go forward with negotiating a contract, which will be subject to further Council approval, was signed off on at last week's General Committee meeting. The topic, however, promises to be the subject of much further debate around the Council table this week as Councillors square off on whether this is the right project.

"To have a proposal with just six tennis courts, I am completely opposed to that because it is not proved that we need that," said Councillor Wendy Gaertner, noting the Town's Parks and Recreation Master Plan calls for more multi-purpose facilities rather than a building serving a single sport.

Councillor Gaertner was responding to one of the failed bids from a group called SportStar which proposed, rather than a dome, a solid structure that could accommodate tennis, soccer, and a wide variety of uses. Ultimately, that bidder came in third in a field of three, but Councillor Gaertner questioned the repercussions of changing course and going in that direction.

Warren Mar, Aurora's Town Solicitor, said the RFP process "conducted a fair and unbiased evaluation process" based on the scope they put out. To go with a different bidder could open the Town up to a lawsuit, he cautioned.

Nevertheless, Councillor Gaertner said she accepted that answer but said it was "almost incredible" to go with the winning option when "it absolutely doesn't make sense financially with respect to our service level, with respect to how we are going to stretch our tax dollars, et cetera."

According to Mr. Downey, however, Canada Winter Tennis' bid will not present any cost to the municipality, as was requested through the RFP, which led to some Councillors questioning their colleague's line of argument.

"When we are talking about stretching dollars, having something not cost us a penny, I think, is a very cost-efficient way of going forward," said Councillor Paul Pirri, noting other proposals, including that of the multi-use facility, have either come with some degree of cost from the Town or, in this particular case, have the Town acting as a guarantor of their loan.

Added Mayor Geoffrey Dawe: "I think it is totally inappropriate for Councillor Gaertner to suggest that somehow following the staff recommendation is somehow putting the Town at financial risk. The opposite is true."

To clarify her point, Councillor Gaertner said the recommendation would not fit the "best interests" of the community as six tennis courts are not needed, according to the Parks and Recreation Master Plan. Different things are needed, she said, that could be covered in a multiuse facility.

?I think if we're going to put anything on this very limited land that we have, we should try and do what the Master Plan says and make it as multipurpose as possible.?

The initial seeds of the six tennis court project were initially planted two years ago by the Aurora Community Tennis Club, who initially pitched a structured multipurpose six-court tennis facility for Fleury Park as a possible Sesquicentennial Project.

Although that project ultimately got scrapped when the tennis club reached an impasse with the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority for constructing a building on a floodplain, Council decided a better location could be found in Stewart Burnett Park and opened the process up for bids.

Although the Aurora Community Tennis Club ultimately did not put in a bid for the project, they came to Council arguing the scope of the RFP was too narrow and would not result in what they had originally envisioned. Their arguments were, at the time, bolstered by Councillor John Gallo, who reiterated the point last week.

?I knew this was going to happen and I was pretty much predicting this kind of outcome that based on those terms of reference, proposals that were grander or different [than just six tennis courts] would be right off the table right away. [Because] the terms of reference were very specific we got very specific proposals. The ones outside of that could not have moved forward.?