

Town goes it alone on Sport Plan

By
Brock Weir

Aurora is set to go it alone on a new sports plan with revised priorities and new recommendations.

Sport Aurora got the ball rolling on the municipality's Sport Plan, which was aimed at removing barriers to sport, ensuring local sports resources meet the needs of a growing community and fostering a climate for sports tourism, but after considerable debate around the table, Council is set to take things in-house.

This week, Council is expected to sign off on a new permanent full-time staff position, a "Sport & Community Development Coordinator" to bring the project in for a landing.

\$103,400 for the new position and the Plan itself have already been allocated as part of the Town's 2019 Operating Budget.

According to the report brought to last Tuesday's General Committee meeting by Recreation Manager Lisa Warth, a review of the Sport Plan's current status has resulted in a "re-prioritization" of the recommendations contained within it.

"Sport Aurora has made good progress on the Sport Plan, however, some of the recommendations are principle-based, philosophical statements, and a measurement of success is difficult to ascertain," said Ms. Warth. "In addition, some of the tactics currently identified for implementation require considerable resources and may be a challenge to move forward."

If approved this week, the revised plan will give increased priority to the creation of a "sport policy" that would "define priorities and responsibilities for sport in Aurora among various stakeholders. Additional emphasis will be placed on volunteer recruitment and training for many organizations within Aurora, as well as training staff and volunteers in "working with culturally diverse groups to understand their sport needs and be able to respond to the changing demographics in Aurora."

Conversely, the new blueprint will give lower priority to developing a sport tourism policy for the Town and assessing the current provision of sports as it relates to older adults.

"The capacity to host sport events is highly dependent on appropriate facilities," said Ms. Warth on the lower priority for Sport Tourism. "As the Town is currently investigating future facilities, it does not make sense to create a policy at this time."

Additionally, the Economic Development strategy will include sports tourism and the results of that study need to be considered in an Aurora Sports Tourism policy.

?As part of the sports policy, a decision needs to be made about whether the needs of older adults is to be a focus on sports (physical activity and an opportunity for competition), or to focus on increasing physical activity alone. Additionally, Activate Aurora has done significant work in the area of physical activity for older adults. Town Staff have committed to sustaining the Older Adults Network created as part of Activate Aurora when the Activate Aurora project wraps up in June 2019.?

By the time the recommendations reached the Committee level last Tuesday, Council members focused on both of these priority changes as well as the cost of creating a new position.

The starting salary for the Sport & Community Development Coordinator will be \$69,000 plus benefits, which would clock in at around \$83,000, said Robin McDougall, Director of Community Services for the Town. The entire amount allocated in the 2019 Operating Budget will not be used at this time as the position will not be filled until later this spring. Going forward, she added, staff would anticipate the full amount will be used in future years, including \$20,000 for the implementation costs of the Sports Plan.

One of the most vocal regarding the new hire was Councillor Harold Kim, who said he was ?never a big proponent? of an internal hire for the role of Sports Coordinator, questioning how bringing the position in-house would make achieving goals within the plan more realistic and achievable.

Ms. McDougall responded that bringing the position in-house would level the playing field in that the person in the position would have access to all the resources and information at Town Hall.

?This process of working towards a Sports Plan, gathering volunteers [for] the sports communities, reminds me of another project [for] Cultural Partners [and we] hired an external consultant to spearhead that,? Councillor Kim continued.
?My understanding is that that is going well and it seems to mirror what we're trying to do here in a certain respect.?

While Ms. McDougall conceded there were ?parallels? in the situation, she also noted ?there are opportunities here where we see benefit in having in-house staff being readily available.?

From other parts of the table, Councillors raised issue with sports tourism being placed on a lower rung than it had previously.

The first to sound

the alarm was Councillor Michael Thompson who said he still saw tourism as one of the 'key principles' in the plan.

'Council has talked

about it from an economic development perspective,' he said. 'Yes, I understand there is a bit of an overlap there with what is currently underway with the Economic Development Board and the Economic Development Strategy, and tourism as well. I don't necessarily want to see sport tourism pushed too far to the side. I still think it is very much a prominent issue for this Council. We talked about it at length with the Hallmark lands and whether it would be one and one or two baseball fields, we continue to talk about it with regards to multipurpose fields and that vision. While I understand that not all of the amenities or facilities are in place to really make a drive today, I still just want to make sure it is somewhere near the forefront in terms of our priority settings for sport tourism.'

Mayor Tom Mrakas had

a similar concern, saying 'we don't want to lose that (sport tourism) and put that aside.

'With the new

Economic Development Corporation in place, that is one of the examples of where Ms. McDougall mentioned that hiring an in-house staff member for the position

[would allow them to]

have access more closely with the corporation and look at

furthering that sport tourism aspect, the total tourism picture for the Town,' he said. 'I think that is a great way for us to move forward on that piece.'

Councillor Wendy

Gaertner's concerns lay in a lower prioritization for the sports needs of older adults.

'There is a significant

amount of work that is already being done and being looked after through the efforts and work of Activate Aurora that initiated the program along with our staff,' said Ms. McDougall. 'Our staff are planning to continue on with that work with the Older Adult Network and it is literally a network of resources, a local volunteer group of individuals who have expertise in the area, whether it is through health, whether it is through medical, or whether it is through just general interest in seeing healthy, active adults.

'There are a lot of

resources on that committee that see initiatives that we can run forward with. It doesn't necessarily have to be defined by sports, but it can be defined by

physical activity and so from a priority perspective, we feel that some of that is already being achieved.?

Responded Councillor Gaertner, ?I would rather look at keeping seniors active and healthy as opposed to promoting competitive sports. I think that the Seniors' Centre does some of that work right now.?