

## Accessible park debate puts equality, location, and cost in focus

**By Brock Weir**

A fully accessible playground for Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park took a significant step forward last week after proposed designs were approved in principle, pending deliberations for the 2015 Budget.

Councillors approved the design in principle after a heated debate around the Council table. Their decision came on the heels of an equally heated debate the previous week at the Committee level over the ballooning price tag of the playground. What was once budgeted at approximately \$180,000, the park, when completed, could cost nearly \$600,000 if the next Council ultimately approves all the bells and whistles that could be incorporated into the park.

Last week's debate, however, focused on need and opposition to the park.

The first Councillor to oppose moving ahead with the park was Councillor John Gallo, who lives across the road from the land in question. A vocal opponent of the proposal, he said there had not been adequate public consultation to prove that this playground was the right option for the right park.

A previously proposed second public meeting should take place to give members of the public a chance to weigh in on the design and options surrounding it.

'We budgeted \$280,000 when this park was originally built,' said Councillor Gallo of the development of what was then known as Civic Square Park a decade ago. 'We now spend \$30,000 on a design and consultant to go out to the public and we have only had one meeting. Now, the last report is suggesting the park is \$570,000, for a total of \$880,000 for a neighbourhood park, not a community park.'

Another bone of contention, he said, is plans for the park do not fall into Aurora's Parks and Recreation Master Plan, which suggests that accessibility playgrounds should be considered for 'major community parks', such as Stewart Burnett Park near the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex, rather than the neighbourhood park which Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park is.

While Councillor Gallo claimed Councillor Paul Pirri's idea for an accessibility playground in this park was 'ill-thought out', Councillor Pirri responded that his opposition was based on shaky math and pointed out what he saw was a disconnect between arguments being heard around the table versus actions performed in the community.

'I take a little bit of umbrage talking about the costs of this park and how it doesn't fit into the master Plan,' said Councillor Pirri. 'It is a little bit hypocritical when one of the largest advocates for purchasing the park on Mavrinac, and so far we don't have a price, but we're looking at it [as] much more substantial than the \$880,000 that the Councillor has brought up.'

Further, he said using the \$880,000 figure was 'shaky math' in bringing in the costs of the past. Things would be different, he said, if they were proposing ripping out existing features at the park, but this is simply an add-on.

'This park isn't just about youth, this is about everyone,' Councillor Pirri concluded. 'This park is fundamental to who we are as Aurorans.'

Joining in opposition to the park, however, were Councillors Evelyn Buck and Wendy Gaertner. In stating her case, Councillor Buck said she was unconvinced of a need for an accessibility park in this particular area. She said she wanted further information that children would benefit from this equipment, and questioned that was the right way forward.

'Children with special needs, as far as I am concerned, need to be integrated with the rest of the community,' she said. 'They need to see other children doing what they do; they need to have the opportunity to meet the challenges [of] other children. They learn more from other children than any other way. I am not convinced we have done enough research to know this is the kind of

playground we need to be spending \$570,578 or if this is the right location for it.?

Councillor Gaertner, on the other hand, said she wanted to fall back on the advice in the Master Plan, as well as word from the community.

?If you want to do an accessible park, we should pick an area that has a larger space and is near a community centre where a lot of people gather. To me, it is in the wrong location and it is way too much money to spend on such a small piece of property.?

Supporters of the plan, on the other hand, said locating it elsewhere would simply throw up another undue barrier.

?It just creates another barrier to send it to the outskirts of our Town,? said Councillor John Abel of suggestions to move it closer to the SARC. ?You need it in a central location for all ages. It is not for children with impairments to find their way as best they can. This is about including them in the same privilege and opportunities that all children have, and that is the right to explore or challenge themselves, their senses, and do it in an area where everyone else is.

?We have to say they are welcome to the same opportunities as everyone else in our Town. I will always move in that path and bring everyone together and?I am not looking for reasons not to go forward and exclude people.?

Following an amendment by Councillor Michael Thompson to simply approve the design in principle, with the options coming forward to the 2015 Budget Cycle, the motion ultimately won the support of Councillors Buck and Gallo, and the motion passed 7 ? 1. Councillor Gaertner remained opposed, stating options should have been presented to Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee before coming to Council.