

Accessible playground endorsed for Diamond Jubilee Park, but committee wants more info

By Brock Weir

Accessibility means different things to different people, and that is what people helping steer the latest development of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park are finding.

Members of Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee formally endorsed the concept of an accessibility playground for Diamond Jubilee Park this month, after a contentious meeting of neighbours in January to discuss changes to what was formerly Civic Square Park on John West Way.

Currently home to a small soccer pitch, the Park was renamed in honour of the Queen's 60th anniversary as Canada's Head of State, several months after the formal celebrations of the milestone were celebrated in 2012.

Going further than a simple name change, Aurora Council voted to do something 'special' with the park and following a Notice of Motion from Councillor Paul Pirri, agreed in a split vote of 6 ? 3 to install a fully accessible playground in the park, which would be just the second such playground in Aurora.

While some Councillors balked at the price tag, clocking in at just under \$150,000, the complete set of bells and whistles which could be included in the playground have yet to be determined.

'The Parks Department had an Open House public consultation in January to solicit public feedback from residents and there were also invitations from the Parks Department and other community groups as well so they could provide comment,' said Chris Catania, Accessibility Advisor for the Town of Aurora.

This month's meeting of the Accessibility Advisory Committee sought comments, suggestions and ideas from its members on what components should be included in a design, selected from a veritable laundry list of options presented by clients.

Although most members of the Committee were on board with the idea, Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who opposed the addition of the accessibility playground at the Council table, reiterated her position.

'I honestly don't know where the Accessibility component came from,' she said. 'I don't think it is in our Parks and Recreation Master Plan. My issue with the park is it is too small to be an integrated, accessible playground. We were thinking [an accessible playground] would be over at the [Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex] where there is a big space.'

The park is approximately one acre in size, with approximately a quarter of it falling within the hydro corridor.

It is surrounded by multiple townhouse developments with families as well as three adult residences, including two adult lifestyle condominium complexes and one assisted living residence. Speaking against the park, Councillor Gaertner said that one of the reasons she is opposed to it is because the park is already well-used by kids 'including members of the Aurora Youth Soccer Club' and neighbours are upset.

Taking the opposite position was Tyler Barker, a long-time accessibility advocate and vice-chair of the committee. Mr. Barker attended the January meeting and said he was 'taken aback' by some of the comments made at the meeting.

'There are a lot of attitudinal barriers,' he said, noting it could be indicative of somewhat of a generation gap. 'One of them asked 'What does accessibility even mean? We didn't have these types of things in the 1950s.' They questioned the noise, but there is noise now.'

?I said it is just about getting out and enjoying the atmosphere for some people with their caregivers like those at Kerry's Place Autism Services and Community Living. [The park could be a destination] for even something as simple as having a picnic with the whole group, having an outing, getting them excited, getting sun, and that is as valuable as physical play. I am totally in favour of this and I think it is a great idea in principle, but I am just one individual.?

At the end of the day, however, moving forward with an accessibility playground might be a good step forward in the name of practicality, noted Mr. Catania. As of January 1, 2016 municipalities will be required by the Province to make sure accessible elements are incorporated into any new park or redevelopment of a park. It is up to interpretation, he said, on how to define ?accessible elements?, but it is something that cannot be avoided.

Possible pieces of accessible playground equipment include adapted swing sets, see-saws with back and foot supports, playhouses, water features, raised sandboxes accessible to those in wheelchairs, rock gardens, and other features to stimulate the senses.

In addition to the accessible playground, the Jubilee will also be commemorated with new signage bearing both the Canadian and British Diamond Jubilee emblems, as well as a commemorative plaque listing the names of all Aurora residents who received the Government of Canada's Diamond Jubilee Medal for their public service.