

Addressing field shortage requires Made In Aurora solution: Council, Advocates

Providing enough sports fields to meet the demands of a growing community has been a perennial issue for the Town of Aurora, but more work is needed to determine just how big the shortfall actually is.

This was the sentiment coming out of last week's Council meeting where Council members and local sports advocates discussed the findings of the Town's draft Outdoor Sports Field Development Strategy.

As The Auroran reported last month, the draft strategy, as presented to Council on January 14, found that 32 additional acres of parkland will be required to meet the future needs of existing Aurora sports groups.

In developing strategies for the Town to meet demand, the study looked at a number of areas, including: adding capacity; addressing high priority needs; leveraging community partnerships; reducing conflicts and/or creating multi-field complexes; replacing facilities that are underused or in poor condition; compatibility with surrounding uses; and having a reasonable chance to be implemented.

Among the recommendations presented are converting and reconfiguring existing fields to better meet demand, adding lights to extend playing opportunities, permit more fields in existing parks, partner with school boards for the permitting of existing fields and developing of new ones; and collaborate with surrounding communities on new opportunities.

But some advocates believe further work needs to be done to crunch the numbers so they are better reflective of the number of Aurora-based players using the fields versus out-of-town members of Aurora-based clubs hitting local soccer pitches and baseball diamonds.

Speaking as a delegate to Council last week, Javed Khan, Director of Community Relations for Sport Aurora, an umbrella group representing dozens of local sports groups, said he agreed with views expressed by Councillor John Gallo in January that numbers used in the study "require verification" before moving forward.

"Like [Councillor Gallo], we believe that self-reported data requires verification by sport governing bodies because any good strategy that has such a financial impact depends on accurate and reliable data objectively gathered," said Mr. Khan. "We also think that the data collected should include not only participant numbers, but age, gender, residency and even level of play, as they all can be concurrently obtained and have relevance." Trends in sport outlined in the Outdoor Sports Field Development Strategy reflect trends noted by Sport Aurora, he added, but "local conditions determine future needs."

?Likewise, with projections for the future, we believe that asking our sport organizations their own projected enrollments is important, he concluded. ?Sports are businesses and they know their resources and their customers. It would be appropriate to ask them what their business plans are for the next two-to-five years. The survey simply asked if they anticipate needs, it didn't ask them the size of those needs.

?We all have a great opportunity to lay down a strong foundation of sport because what matters gets built. This is both a challenge and an opportunity to build a quality sport community.?

These sentiments were echoed by several Council members, including Councillor Gallo who encouraged a deeper dive into participants and data. Further work also needs to be done, he said, on service levels as they pertain to rectangular sports fields, like soccer pitches, as well as baseball diamonds.

?I think that goes hand in hand with the proper data collection and the analysis that will come from that and filter through service level and then we determine how many fields we actually need. Subject to continuing discussions on those two specific items, I am in support of moving forward, particularly on the rectangular field side. If we lose Magna (which currently provides nearly 20 rectangular fields for Town use, all of which are expected to be developed in the next few years) I think it is a big deal and we shouldn't just pause full stop until we get that information. For me, that information is vital to determine what our needs actually are.?

Councillor Michael Thompson also underscored the potential hit the Town will have to address once the Magna fields are no longer available.

?We embarked on this because we all recognize there's a need, he said. ?We have some concerns in the near future. Councillor Gallo raised Magna and other places where we need to address those issues. This is an attempt for us to be as proactive as possible at this point to try and remedy those issues. However, there are valid concerns being raised about we want to make sure the strategy is correct, that our assumptions are right, but it sounds like if we do endorse this strategy in principle, we have time to address those concerns brought up by user groups as well as Councillor Gallo and others.

?Similar to Councillor Gallo's comments, I am okay moving forward as long as we continue to do our due diligence and look into these issues so when the time comes to make those budgetary decisions that the information is there to validate those decisions.?

Added Councillor Wendy Gaertner: ?We have to get this right. We need to keep working at this. The consultant's report is not enough. It's a fantastic start, but it is Aurora and it needs to be a solution that is Aurora-based and right for Aurora.?

On a 6 ? 0 vote, with Councillor Rachel Gilliland absent from last week's meeting, Council approved the Sports Field Development Strategy in principle, subject to Council's approval of subsequent budgetary implications.

By Brock Weir