

Aurora says thanks, but no thanks to Provincial counter-offer on sports lands

By Brock Weir

Aurora might need the help of its MPP to ensure local soccer teams have the room they need to play.

Following last week's meeting, Councillors will be looking to MPP Frank Klees for help in securing the lease on a parcel of land currently owned by the Ontario Infrastructure and Lands Corporation (OILC) to create five acres of sports fields for current user groups.

After several false starts, and additional requirements handed down from the Province, however, the Town and the Province appear to have reached an impasse in making the deal at 100 Bloomington Road a reality.

In a report before Council last week, Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation said Council had previously approved the license agreement in principle, but the Province has continued to put up new obstacles. Among these were requirements by Aurora to undertake a hydrogeological investigation on the site, along with an archaeological survey and an assessment on how using the land would affect species at risk.

‘These requirements, although not fully divulged by the OILC during our initial discussions, were required and conditional on OILC entering a licence agreement for the Town's use of the lands,’ said Mr. Downey. ‘Acting in good faith?’ staff completed all of the studies over the summer of 2013.

‘Upon receipt of the revised draft licence agreement, it was evident that there had been significant revisions to the financial requirements, whereby the Town would now be required to pay an annual fee of \$18,000, up from the \$1,000 annual fee proposed in the initial draft agreement. Staff discussed this issue and it appears the fees will not be reduced as it is OILC policy to require any lessee to pay fees that are based on the highest and best use value for any OILC property. In fact, OILC have indicated that their evaluation and consideration of the licence fee represents a value that is well below its highest and best use and they intend to support these fees based on the proposed interim use values related to parkland.’

Staff recommended to Council they not follow through with the license agreement under these terms and they were all too happy to comply. Speaking to Councillors, Mr. Downey added that Mr. Klees was ‘instrumental’ in a first intervention when the Town was looking at this property and his office now has a formal request by the Town to tackle it once more.

Councillors, however, wanted to take this one step further and send a clear message to the province.

‘We should make it clear this re-alignment from when this negotiation started is not satisfactory,’ said Councillor John Abel. ‘The government could change and there might be another person within the Province that might take a more practical aspect of what we're trying to deal with and that is land just sitting there unused that we can use to kick a soccer ball, which we dearly need in this Town. I think it is up to the Province to say we'll work something out with you, not 50 times the amount we started out with.’

Similar views were given by Councillor Chris Ballard, who said he believed Aurora had a ‘handshake deal’ on the land at ‘considerably less’ and he was disappointed there seemed to be some renegeing. For Councillor Michael Thompson, Aurora had to give Ontario a clear direction.

‘We need to clearly say this is unacceptable,’ he said. ‘We had what we thought was a deal and they changed the terms, we're not interested. Let's continue that dialogue to see if there is a secondary path that could provide some leverage or an opportunity for us to do this. I agree with Mr. Downey: thanks, but no thanks.’

Added Councillor Buck, noting Councillor Ballard's standing for provincial election: ‘Maybe we should just wait for Councillor Ballard to be elected and he will look after it for us!’