

Aurora seeks use for Mavrinac "parkland"

By Brock Weir

A search for a practical use for six acres of land recently purchased on Mavrinac Boulevard will soon begin following a Council decision last week, talks which ruled out the possibility of affordable housing on the land.

The land in question is a large parcel that became a rallying point for residents of Aurora's 2B development ? the residential neighborhood radiating from the northeast corner of Bayview Avenue and Wellington Street East ? after the York Catholic District School Board relinquished rights to the property after rethinking their strategy on building a new school in the area.

Following the outcry of area residents concerned the property developer would turn the land over to further housing, despite existing landowners being assure the area would either be a school or open space, the Town stepped in to exercise its right of first refusal to purchase the land at terms and prices set out in the subdivision agreement executed in 2007.

The Town purchased the land from Minto Communities following a legal battle that fell just short of reaching court.

Last week's decision to somewhat expedite determining a final use for the land stemmed from a motion from Councillor Harold Kim, calling for a report to come back to Council outlining options and prices for future parks and recreational use of the property.

?Myself, and the residents of the neighbourhood, are extremely excited about the next step forward and this motion is to initiate the discussion,? said Councillor Kim, adding he was particularly interested with having such options available to Council for implementation by next year.

In response to the motion, Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, said it would be a challenge for staff to bring back a list of options by the time Council begins budget deliberations this fall, but it is feasible to bring forward some suggestions in early 2016.

Moving forward with a plan for the Mavrinac land would not be informed by any findings coming up in the new Parks and Recreation Master Plan, which is still being drafted.

?The normal process is staff will be developing some conceptual plans that would be presented to the public for their information, as well as their opportunity to provide input to staff on some of the elements they would like to see in the park,? said Mr. Downey. ?We would then take that information, refine it, and then come forward to Council with a proposed budget as well as a proposed conceptual plan. Council would then have the opportunity to make modifications to that, or the budget. Once the budget is approved, we would then go back to the public with options.?

Councillors approved lighting a fire on the Mavrinac project in a 6 ? 2 vote (Councillor Wendy Gaertner was absent from the meeting for religious observances). For supporters, it was time to take ownership of the land.

?I would think if we asked this to come back right away, we could get it done right away,? said Councillor John Abel, who went on to make an amendment for the Town to take ?ownership? of the land by removing existing fencing, and making minimal landscaping efforts to allow public access onto the property before Council is able to look at the options being explored. ?Rather than wait a year and a half with a fence, why not let people walk through there??

This was generally supported by Councillor Michael Thompson who said ?simple things? like taking down the fence might be ?helpful.?

Some Councillors, including Councillor Paul Pirri, balked at that suggestion, concerned over potential liability on the land, arguing it would set a precedent of saying to the public ?this is your space, use it as you wish right now.?

Councillor Paul Pirri was one of two Council members voting against moving forward with Councillor Kim's motion. The other was Mayor Geoff Dawe who said he could not support the motion because it 'presupposes' the land will be set aside for parks and recreation use without being factored into the Parks and Recreation Master Plan. This was an opinion shared by Councillor Pirri.

'It excludes a lot of different options I thought could have been on the table,' he said. 'I would still love to see some element of affordable housing put on this, partnered with Habitat for Humanity, or other organizations in Town, but not for the whole lot because I don't think that would be responsible for us to do, but definitely a portion of the lot [of up to 10 homes.] I am happy to get staff to put the pedal to the metal in getting us a report quickly, but to preclude or exclude other elements of this parcel of property, I am not sure if that is the best and most efficient use of the property.'

Two attempts to have affordable housing included as an option to be explored were shot down by Council with some members underscoring the land was never earmarked for housing and having further homes built just beyond the backyards of surrounding properties was a possibility neighbours objected to in the first place.