

Aurora will need to look outside the box to address field needs: study

Aurora will need to deploy some out-of-the-box thinking and explore new partnerships to meet the sports field requirements of a growing community, according to a new study presented at Council last week.

Last Tuesday, Council received recommendations stemming from the Town's Outdoor Field Development Strategy, a plan in the works since 2018 to look at how local current sports fields in the community – particularly soccer pitches and baseball diamonds – were being used today and what will be required to meet the needs of a growing community tomorrow.

The conclusion: there are some significant challenges ahead.

Presented at the Committee level, the study finds that almost half of the Town's existing sports fields are on parcels of land not owned by the Town and an estimated 32 additional acres of parkland will be required to meet the future needs of existing sports groups.

“These needs cannot be met strictly by traditional means such as the land development process as greenfield land supplies are dwindling and additional community parks are not anticipated,” said John Firman of the Town of Aurora, in his report to Council. “As a result, sport field development must focus on improving what we have, optimizing our sites, acquiring land, and working in partnership with owners of other large sites.” 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.

“Existing sports fields are at or approaching capacity,” said consultant Stephen Langlois, presenting his findings to last week's General Committee meeting. “Your population is growing as well, so we need to look ahead. Land is not easy to come by in your municipality. The Town recently made a number of changes to help keep pace with some of these demands, but we know that sport field demands continue to rise, changes are happening in terms of trends and participation [so] the look-ahead is very important so that we right-size the supply to what the needs are within your sport community.

“You don't have many new community parks coming your way.

Those have been the mainstay of sports field development in your community and others, so we have to get a bit more creative. We [need to] look at optimizing field supply and ultimately working with non-municipal organizations, many of which might have land to meet those needs.?

Currently, the Town offers 60 rectangular fields, suitable for a number of uses, particularly soccer. Half of these are not owned by the municipality and 19 are on Magna-owned lands slated for future development. 20 additional rectangular fields ? 13 resulting from the loss of Magna fields ? are required to meet demand by 2031.

As for baseball diamonds, the Town has access to 18 fields right now and there is a current deficit of two. By 2031, the Town will need five additional diamonds and if these are all built on new land, 12 hectares would be required to make it happen.

?At a high level, there are four things we can do: we can improve and repurpose what you have, we can develop new or permit fields that are not currently permitted within your parks, we can expand partnerships with non-municipal landowners and we can modify operational practices and policy coordination,? said Mr. Langlois. ?We looked at opportunities to expand or reconfigure a park. We looked at field improvements, opportunities to install artificial turf to enhance capacity. Norm Weller Park is one example there. You have some new neighbourhood parks coming on stream, and there is an opportunity for some new smaller fields in those, as well as most notably expanding partnerships. That's probably your most viable solution to addressing the loss of the Magna fields ? to redeploy your resources and scheduling to go out to particularly the public school board lands.?

Among the school-based options, significant opportunities might lie on lands currently home to Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School. As the York Region District School Board plans to move the high school, presently located on Dunning Avenue, to a yet-to-be-constructed new building on Bayview Avenue at Borealis, in the first half of this decade, the lands on Dunning could provide several hectares ripe for partnership.

Mr. Langlois recognized that the Town would not be able to achieve all that is required within the plan, but what was before them was a good ?starting point? in the right direction.

Receiving the presentation, Council had a number of questions for both the consultant and Robin McDougall, Director of Community Services, for the Town of Aurora.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, for instance, questioned the wisdom of earmarking lands currently designated as floodplain for rectangular fields. While Mayor Tom Mrakas and Councillor John Gallo both called for a further breakdown on usage rates noted in the report.

The study relied on data from various sports groups on

how they used existing fields, but the Mayor and Councillor said more details on the numbers of users who actually reside within Aurora would be a more accurate way to determine what is required for the future.

“The report confirms what we have all known, which is as we grow we need to become creative in how we provide new or enhance our existing fields and sports facilities,” said Mayor Mrakas. “Through repurposing, through working with the school boards, as we heard, maybe possibly working with partners? from private partnerships, these are the things we’re going to need to do to order to provide value for our residents and for the tax dollars that we spend to develop as we grow.

“I am looking forward to the upcoming reports from staff that are going to develop from these recommendations and I am sure that staff will bring enhanced reports and work with what they have through these recommendations and provide maybe some better numbers. I agree with Councillor Gallo that some of the numbers I do have some issues with them and I don't agree with some of them, but I think staff have heard us and they will work with that and provide us with maybe some better, stronger numbers as they provide their reports with these recommendations coming forward and how we look at repurposing? and providing that value for residents and our sports communities.”

From Councillor Michael Thompson's perspective, since being first elected to Council in 2010, he has heard many times that adding capacity and land will require leveraging community partnerships. The conversation, he said, “isn't new” so he welcomed the report's examination of how existing fields could be repurposed.

“I think there are still more questions that come out of the report for us to look into, as Councillor Gallo and others have indicated, but at least it gives us a good starting point,” said Councillor Thompson. “We have been looking towards more specifics and some more thoughts about how best to proceed, and I think this gives us a good foundation on which to build upon.”

By Brock Weir