

Baseball, soccer and football clubs jostle for a piece of Hallmark lands

By Brock Weir

The gloves are off, but Aurora's sports clubs are keeping it friendly in their bids to get much needed field time as the Town looks to redevelop the Hallmark lands into sports fields.

Council members last week were asked to approve one of two designs for the lands on Vandorf Road previously owned by Hallmark. One plan would have seen the construction of two large baseball diamonds, the other would combine a diamond with a soccer pitch, both items desperately needed according to local sports clubs.

But the sports clubs will have to call it a draw ? at least for the time being.

Their competing pitches to Council stalled a decision, resulting in the plans being sent back to the drawing board to ensure whatever plan ultimately rises to the top will best address their different needs.

The first club to make their pitch was the Aurora Soccer Club (ASC), represented by Martin Ambrose.

The staff proposal, he said, recommends a \$3 million budget to construct two baseball diamonds and while Mr. Ambrose stressed he was not at the podium to speak against the needs of local baseball clubs, he questioned how the Town is prioritizing needs outlined in its Master Parks and Recreation Plan.

“The rise in soccer's popularity across Canada is imminent,” said Mr. Ambrose. “The Town's long-term vision is to develop the Town into a healthy, strong and complete community that provides a range of places and opportunities to live. A complete community is designed for all stages of life, and that includes places to meet, build social connections, and support healthy and active lifestyles.

“We recognize according to the Master Plan that the Aurora and King City Baseball Association has 720 players, which has been updated to 1,062 in 2017. The Canadian Soccer Association reports 2.6 million players, half a million of which are in Ontario, 59,000 registered in Aurora, 70 per cent of our members are from Aurora. The desperate shortage of playing fields for soccer throughout the town is not a surprise. While a new facility on Wellington is most welcome, the ASC has been proactive in addressing its capacity issues.”

This is an issue which will only be compounded, he said, with use of Shepherd's Bush and the potential loss of soccer fields on lands currently owned by Magna.

The ASC, he added, has already had to rent fields outside of Aurora, namely at Newmarket's Police Shed just off Bayview Avenue, and the Hallmark lands would be an ideal location for more fields “only 200 yards from our current facility.”

Next up was Roy Cohen, President of the Aurora Youth Soccer Club, who was also speaking on behalf of the Aurora Football Club. The Aurora Youth Soccer Club (AYSC) has been around for 54 years, hosting over 4,000 youth in existing programs. Older players, however, in the U19 and U29 divisions are a fast growing demographic, he said, meaning membership retention is fantastic and that can be chalked in part up to collaboration with the Town in meeting their needs.

“We see now older kids are playing and coming out and it is a beautiful thing to see Sunday night at Craddock (Park) where parents are coming out to watch their 22 and 23 sons daughters and sons play,” said Mr. Cohen. “Don't forget about us, don't forget about what we need, the kids we impact and, more importantly, the community we hold dear. It is about the kids. We're here for the kids and we want to make sure they have proper, safe facilities and we can grow this sport.

“The whole idea is inclusiveness. Our neighbours in York Region look at Aurora with high esteem and I think inclusiveness is very important. Those numbers really aren't important. I think what is important is we provide proper facilities. Aurora is growing by leaps and bounds and there are lots of great things in the future, but we can't get caught behind in sports and rec.”

Last up was Jamie Cole, President of the Aurora King Baseball Association (AKBA), also representing the Aurora Diggers softball team.

Enrolment in AKBA programs, he said, has been skyrocketing, now holding at 1,000 kids and many more being turned away. This is a trend they expect will continue, he added.

“We have done everything we can to make sure we give every child the opportunity as much as possible. We have added private diamonds in Newmarket, we have cut down on practice times and even added Sunday evening games for the kids to play. The Diggers are also at capacity. They are hoping to host the Provincial championship this year but there is no place to hold one at this time because there is already a tournament schedule that weekend and we can't hold more than one tournament in Aurora at this time.

“According to the Town of Aurora website, there are 69 soccer fields right now in Aurora. There are 18 baseball diamonds. We feel

that number is a little out of balance. There have been no new softball size diamonds in approximately 15 years. The only diamond built was the Stewart Burnett diamond, which can only be used, because of the mound, by senior players, high level players. Due to the nature and pace of play in baseball, on most of the diamonds, we can only play one game. We can't play two games on one diamond, for safety reasons as well as needing the backstop area.?

Two ball diamonds built together, as in one of the two proposals before Council last week, would bring many benefits to the community, he added. A primary benefit would be the ability to host tournaments. Lambert Willson Park's multiple diamonds make this Aurora's only destination for holding baseball tournaments and there is a lot of potential that is being missed, he said. If Council ratifies the decision made at the Committee level last week, comments from each respective sports clubs will be compiled into a report and their concerns addressed at a special meeting of Aurora's Parks, Recreation & Culture Advisory Committee set for May