

Baseball, soccer to split Hallmark lands

By Brock Weir

The soccer community wanted two soccer fields to meet their growing needs, the baseball community wanted two diamonds to address the same issue, but will a compromise reached Tuesday over the future use of Aurora's Hallmark lands make everyone happy?

Only time will tell whether that will be achieved by the compromise Council reached last week of one full-sized baseball diamond and one full-sized senior soccer pitch, a decision made after weeks of lengthy, heated, and, to borrow a phrase used by sports clubs taking part in the discussions, "emotional" debate.

Council approved the "one and one" solution on a vote of 7 to 2, with Councillors John Abel and Jeff Thom voting against it.

It was the third vote on the matter taken that evening after a vote for two diamonds failed by the same margin, with Councillors Abel and Wendy Gaertner opposed, and a motion to defer the issue pending further information on possible partnership with local school boards on field facilities was similarly voted down.

"The last time I spoke I was [for] one and one," said Councillor Wendy Gaertner, noting Aurora's ongoing battle with the Province of Ontario to secure surplus provincially-held land near Cardinal Carter Catholic High School for field use. "If I could be sure that the Bloomington lands would come online" my preference would be to defer this. Have we investigated the possibility of using the Board of Education's fields for soccer? I don't know that we have done enough work on this.

"If I could be assured we would get the Bloomington lands, there would be no doubt in my mind they should go to baseball. I do not know that we're going to do that. We're dealing with the Provincial government, we're dealing with a new Provincial government, so I will have to sadly, because I know it is not going to please either group, go with the one and one option."

The majority of Council, however, felt that more than enough work had been done on this project, but work could still continue on negotiating with the Province and the Boards.

"We have been discussing this for over a year," said Councillor Tom Mrakas. "We have discussed it at budget, we have discussed it with staff, staff have brought us all the information, we have information coming out of our ears. I don't think that we're going to get anything new that presents itself."

A similar view was offered by Councillor Michael Thompson, who added, "I think staff have continually tried to address the issue and look at various remedies available. We might not have all the solutions, but I can't see deferring it at this point in time. I think it is time to make a decision."

Councillor Abel, who has been a vocal proponent of selling the Hallmark lands and using profits to both retrofit existing sports fields, particularly those at Machell Park, and invest in other land opportunities, sided with Councillor Gaertner.

"This is a very divided issue right here," he said. "We should go back and try to find a way that everyone can be looked at and looked after. The main thing that is really of concern is there is no alternative in our report. There is a lot more information [that can be brought forward] to the table and we will be able to listen to our sports groups, all of them, not just one and get them all involved so we can come to the best solution in addressing this. Right now we're spending too much money for anything on Hallmark and I would like to see this go back because I believe it is our responsibility to do what is fiscally responsible and also what is best for our sports community.

"I am all in favour of providing two class-A ball diamonds for the Aurora King (Club). I think it is very important, but I also consider we have a fiscal responsibility and putting two ball diamonds on Hallmark at a cost of \$5.25 million each is not a responsible solution."

Councillor Abel also advocated for knuckling down and investigating further the possibility of putting sports fields on otherwise unbuildable land on the Oak Ridges Moraine.

"One thing we can all agree on, whether it is rectangular or ball diamonds, they only are operating for four months of the year, which means they are basically not used for eight months. That is the reason you build these fields on developable land because it saves you a lot of money and then the developable land is an excellent source of tax assessment and revenue and employment land specifically is extremely valuable."

All avenues, however, need to be explored by Council to meet the needs of existing and future years, noted Councillor Thompson. There is no doubt that soccer fields and baseball diamonds are needed, but he contended these issues won't be solved with just the Hallmark lands.

"I wish we had both pieces of land, I wish we had Bloomington or some other parcel of suitable size so we could make these

decisions easier, but I believe we have to trust the process," he said. "Yes, we have been after Bloomington forever but there is a process the Province has to follow and we're first in line. They can't sell it before giving it to us.

"I believe there will be a suitable piece of property to come up to address future needs. Our Parks and Rec Master Plan calls for a sports complex with three fields and we continue to look at the possibility of doing that at Bloomington and running into partnership with Cardinal Carter to build the artificial turf like we did at [St.] Maximilian Kolbe. That is the path we set upon and that is the path I would like to stay upon and so that is why I am in favour of two baseball diamonds."

Mayor Geoff Dawe was also initially supportive of the two diamond option, asking Operations Director Al Downey to clarify the cost of two diamonds -- \$3 million for two diamonds and a parking lot, he said -- and leaving the door open to exploring opportunities on the Moraine.

"When we purchased the Hallmark land, we looked at the entire property," said Mayor Dawe. "That didn't come to fruition. So, we purchased the land for recreational purposes. That's what we purchased it for. That was a decision that was made by Council in 2015. We are doing with that land exactly what we wanted to do, which is the recreational purposes.

"If we carefully read the report from staff, I think it is pretty clear that the current need is baseball. We are always looking for additional properties. We're talking to the school boards, we have had success with St. Max. It is good to hear we are looking at the other options because those fields are a great option for us to use. If Machell is a great location for baseball, why is it not a great location or soccer fields?"

Supporting the initial vote for two diamonds were Mayor Dawe, along with Councillors Harold Kim, Jeff Thom and Thompson. After continued talks and failed motions, Mayor Dawe and Councillors Kim and Thompson ultimately went with the "compromise."