

Collaboration with school board is essential to tackle recreation crunch: advocates

By Brock Weir

Time is of the essence to address shortfalls in Aurora's recreation facilities, according to advocates, and Council agrees that a possible solution might be found on the current site of Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School.

Following a motion from Councillor Tom Mrakas last week, Aurora will be reaching out to the York Region District School Board whether or not there will be an opportunity to transform the current home of Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School on Dunning Avenue into a possible site for Aurora's future multiuse sports facility once the school moves to Bayview Avenue in five years. As The Auroran reported last week, it is an option which already found support from Sport Aurora, an umbrella organization representing over 40 local sports clubs, but only received the ringing endorsement of Council last Tuesday night.

"I think this is an opportunity for us to explore with the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) the lands that currently house Dr. G.W. Williams," said Councillor Mrakas. "We all know they will be moving, they stated that, and I think that [an] opportunity has presented itself that we should explore and have those conversations to see what is available and what could happen."

"I think the last thing I would want to see happen [is the Board sell the land] and it get turned into a subdivision and I think the majority would not want to see that. When we're in a deficit of lands when it comes to our sports facilities, this is an opportunity to explore, have staff go out and have those conversations and find out if the Board is willing to have those conversations. For all we know, the Board could say no."

Once those conversations take place, and if there is interest from the YRDSB, then community partners can be brought on board for deeper conversations, he said.

This was music to the ears of Sport Aurora who delegated to Council earlier in the evening voicing their support both for Councillor Mrakas' motion, as well as a similar motion from Mayor Geoff Dawe calling for talks with the Board on collaboration on their new Bayview Avenue build.

"Partnerships should not distract from the long-term goal of a multisport facility, but rather compliment what is to be built in the future," said Sport Aurora president Stephen Kimmerer. "We also believe the Town has an obligation to sport, recreation and this community to continue investigating land options for the multi-sport complex. We currently have facility deficits such as aquatics, gymnasium and field spaces. As our population grows to a predicted 90,000 residents, these deficits will only increase. Now that the proposed Bloomington site lands have stalled and its outcomes possibly awaiting the Provincial election and no guarantee a new government will release those lands, every option should be considered. Back-up plans need to be devised."

"However, Sport Aurora feels strongly that time is of the essence. The demand is substantial and field, ice, gym and pool partners are struggling to grow their programs while the community demands are increasing. The multisport facility must remain a high priority and while we continue to investigate all options, any land solutions should be timely and steadfast."

In the view of Councillor Michael Thompson, the current home of Williams is a "key piece of property" within Aurora and has always been of interest and conversations are an important step in securing the land's future.

"We have learned from our dealings with Highland Gate, Mavrinac and so forth that it is important to build that relationship with them and make sure we have an opportunity to talk with them about what is possible," said Councillor Thompson. "I would rather be at the beginning of the conversation than to find out the property has been sold to be developed [and it is] too late to get involved." Agreed Councillor Harold Kim: "I firmly support that we start the dialogue right now, and plant that seed, and let them know where we stand. It would be a great opportunity. Let's do it now before someone else plants that seed."

While Mayor Geoff Dawe pointed out that processes in place on the disposition of properties like Williams means that Aurora would be kept in the loop on future opportunities, Councillor John Abel said visions for the site might go beyond sport.

"We have had the opportunity to have [the Hallmark lands] ? we own a part of it now and we could have had the whole building, but we weren't prepared at that time," he said. "Being prepared and having something going on beforehand allows you to move when the fire is hot. With Hallmark, we delayed for a second and the building sold right in front of us. The idea of G.W. Williams crossed our minds in 2013 when we were exploring a university campus and, working with Windsor, we talked about that as a potential spot."

"We have post-secondary visions, the expansion of Niagara College would be perfect. We should keep our options open about what could be done in this facility. We could also have an incubator there because the building itself is structurally sound, big and massive. The education system would be interested in partnering to help their budget moving forward."