

Community park plan for Hartwell Way hit by rising costs

Plans for a more natural-style community park on Hartwell Way have been hit by rising costs, leaving some Councillors wondering if some features can be left off the final list to save money.

Council, sitting at the Committee level last week, gave the tentative green light to a budget increase of \$923,500 to make the park a reality.

Should this budget increase be approved, the park ? which will include several unique features, including a natural playground, dedicated space for community gardens, as well as a band shell ? would have a price tag of \$2,423,500 funded from reserves.

Lawmakers expressed dismay that initial cost estimates were so far off the mark, but when pressed over potential features they might strike off the list to bring the price down, nothing rose to the top.

?We thought we had enough when we went out to tender,? said Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Operations. ?We wouldn't have called the tender if we thought we were going to be that far off the mark.?

One of the key amenities that was driving the cost increase, he said, was the move away from a traditional playground towards more natural structures made out of black walnut, which could prove more durable in the long-run.

?It did come as a bit of a surprise for us that costs had come in so high but, at the same time this is coming, we were trying to address not only the needs of the community but the needs of Council as well,? Mr. Downey continued, referencing many of the park features previously approved by Council to make this one unique.

Councillor John Gallo was the first at the table to float the idea of looking at the individual components of the park in order to bring it back in line with the budget. While he said he was a proponent of the park, and costs tend to rise over time, the question was, ?Do we bite the bullet and just do it??

?Do we do this? Do we pause? Do we re-scope it in order to be a bit more budget-sensitive?? he asked, before further suggesting going back to the plan and seeing what can be constructed in phases in the hopes of finding a cost-savings.

Councillor Michael Thompson agreed that costs tend to go up over time but noted that he's seeing prices rising ?across the board? already on many projects like these.

?There might be some savings in delaying this project, but?nobody has a crystal ball and you can't say that with any degree of certainty,? said Councillor Thompson, before asking staff when a decision would need to be made in order to break ground on the park this year.

?Very soon,? was the answer that came from Mr. Downey, with June being the ideal time to get things started.

Mayor Mrakas agreed that if there is a delay costs would likely continue to rise.

?I don't think any of us are happy with the price increase, but we have seen the inflation, we have seen what's been going on?we have seen prices going up, we have seen labour shortages?we have seen prices skyrocketing. If we don't lock it in, if we don't think it's the right thing to do, we shouldn't do it. If we think it is going to benefit the community to have this park there, as much as I think we all hate the fact the price is increased, if we delay it, it is just going to be more. How does that benefit the community??

If Council opts to ?re-scale? the Hartwell Way park plan in order to be more budget-conscious, how they might do so might prove to be a contentious issue. Between the band shell, the community gardens and the natural playground, each feature had their supporters

around the table.

"I think a band shell is something we have always wanted there," said Councillor Rachel Gilliland. "I don't know how much scaling back we can do on that. Community gardens, if anything, I believe that with the rising food costs the community gardens is a really big want. I really think it does serve a real great need in the community in order to participate in a spot to grow their own vegetables.

"I am trying to understand where we would scale back aside from the actual playground. If it all comes down to scaling back to \$340,000 ? do you want the natural playground or do you not? There are so many different things we can speak to as to why we would want one playground over the other.

"Is it worth it? I feel this community has waited a long time for a park there and I think we need to make up our mind. As the old saying goes, [blank] or get off the pot. Hopefully between now and Council we will get some more clarity on it."

There was sticker ?shock? for Councillor Sandra Humfryes as well, but what was locked in place has been a long time coming, she argued.

"The community garden is a huge aspect of what I think neighbourhoods would really like to see in a designated area like this," she said, adding she was heartened that the money would be coming out of reserves that were in the black. "It is such an exciting plan I don't want to see scale-back here. I think we have to do what we need to do for optimal living for our residents. They deserve it. It has been a long time coming and if I saw?we would be hurting in the reserves, if I saw any indication [we needed somewhere else] to get money to pay for this? but the reserve balance is projected to be healthy for the next 10 years."

Council opted to move forward at this point in time, leaving the door open to further consideration by the time the decision comes up for final approval on May 24.

"Pick and choose what we think will be the best park outcome," said Councillor Harold Kim. "We have a couple of weeks for Council to have second thoughts then."

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