

Council rejects Motion to endorse Aurora Sport Plan

At the February 25 Council meeting, Councillors voted to postpone their endorsement of the Sport Plan update created by Town staff and requested that it be revised for a future session.

Following the approval of the Parks and Recreation Master Plan in June 2023, Council expressed their support for the need to update the Town's expired Sport Plan in June 2024. A Toronto-based firm, Optimus SBR, was awarded the \$40,000 contract to aid staff in creating a 2025-2029 Sports Plan to serve the community better.

The updated plan presented to Council was designed to act as a guide for Staff, [Local Sports Organizations], and [Community Sports Organizations] for delivering quality sports programs in Aurora over the next five years.

It outlined four strategic goals: leadership development and volunteer support, sport participant engagement, community sport sustainability, and sport tourism.

However, Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese expressed concerns about the Plan's lack of detail.

Councillor Weese, who has made significant contributions to sports and recreation in Aurora, including founding groups like Sport Aurora and the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame, as well as aiding in developing the previous Sport Plan approved in 2016, was critical of the Plan's vagueness.

He specifically pointed to the absence of data on recreational participation, the value of volunteer hours, annual partnerships, and the economic impact of sport tourism in Aurora.

Weese also questioned how the data used in the update was gathered. He raised these concerns to the Town Director of Community Services Robin McDougall noting that several local sports organizations had expressed doubts about the validity of the survey data used to inform the Plan.

McDougall explained that the Plan was based on surveys distributed to two separate groups.

The first was a public survey posted on Engage Aurora, which received 268 responses and asked residents about their interest in and participation in sports, as well as potential improvements to sports and recreation in the community.

Separate from that was the discussion and questions that were directed to the sport organizations, said McDougall. We couldn't just take the sport organizations' questionnaire and just give it to the public there would be some content they wouldn't understand and would therefore be very invalid.

She clarified that the update was not necessarily a data collection initiative. Instead, she said, It was about hearing from the [sport organizations], about learning from them today compared to 2016. The process was to look at the priorities that each organization felt they needed help with that is what resulted in this SWOT analysis and certainly in the end in the recommendations. There are actionable items under each of those recommendations. Each one will result in a plan to come forward in how that will be implemented.

Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner also expressed dissatisfaction with the Plan's comparison of Aurora's Sport Plan to those of larger municipalities.

McDougall explained that such comparisons were intended to learn from how they do business and how municipalities can support sport in their communities.

?I remember that answer and I understand it,? responded Gaertner. ?But the thing is, maybe those communities were successful because of their size and their tax base and just their ability to have enough staff and wherewithal to deliver the services. So, I would have liked to also, if not entirely, to have been compared to places like Newmarket.

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo echoed Weese's concerns and suggested deferring the Plan.

?I consider [Councillor Weese] an expert in the field?and I think we should all rely on each other when we're experts in particular fields to try to listen and make sure that that particular Councillor is satisfied with what's before us. And I get the sense?that he's not particularly satisfied with this?If there is no urgency [to approve this Plan] for tonight, if it can wait another cycle, I'm happy [to defer] to make sure everyone is satisfied.?

?I too am concerned about the concept of endorsing this because endorsing something means that we think it's right, we think it's accurate, and we want the staff to go forward and spend both their time and money on doing it,? said Weese. ?I think we need a deeper dive on this, and I'd like the consultant to consider the specific needs of the people that the Sport Plan is being delivered to and for, which are the sport organizations.?

In the end, Council voted to defer the Plan and sent it back to staff and their consultant for further revisions, with the matter to be revisited in a future meeting.

By Selena Loureiro