

Council renews vision to turn Hallmark lands into baseball hub

Council has formally renewed its vision to turn the Hallmark lands into a hub for community baseball.

On a vote of 5 ? 2 last month, Council voted to nix a proposed indoor baseball training facility for the land in favour of their original vision of two full-size baseball diamonds to address Town-wide diamond shortages being weathered by local baseball teams and organizations, including the Aurora King Baseball Association (AKBA).

Work on the two baseball diamonds was originally slated to begin this year after considerable Council debate on whether the land, secured by the 2014 ? 2018 Council to address field shortages, would be best used for two soccer fields, two baseball diamonds, or one of each.

A late in the game pitch from baseball proponents on a public-private partnership for a baseball dome, however, caused a re-think of these plans, but after staff deemed resulting proposals unfavourable to the Town and heard from user groups that such a facility wouldn't help them get in more diamond time, lawmakers were back where they started.

The matter was revisited at the June 16 General Committee (GC) meeting where the majority of Council voted to wipe the slate clean and go back to the original plan for two diamonds.

?While I would still like to see multi-purpose, while I still think the more value you provide to the majority of our residents the better? at this point, I am in favour of moving forward and going forward with what the majority of Council decided to approve at the time,? said Mayor Tom Mrakas at the GC meeting.

Voting against the motion at the following week's Council meeting, however, were Councillors John Gallo and Wendy Gaertner.

Councillor Gallo, who was never a proponent of lands formally designated for employment use being reclassified for recreational purposes, reiterated his position that the potential \$3 million price tag to build the two diamonds was not a sound investment for the municipality.

?Land value, we paid \$7 million. We're paying at least \$3 million [for construction]. We're at \$10 million for two baseball diamonds, no taxes in perpetuity on employment lands, highly valued employment lands, and I wholeheartedly, once again, believe this is a mistake,? he said. ?We should not be building recreational facilities on employment lands and to spend \$5 million per baseball diamond just blows my mind how we are moving forward with this. I can't stress how much I am against this.?

Referring to his support for a multiuse facility if the

land was, in the end, going to be developed for recreational purposes, he added: "We had a report from staff that had some other recommendations. I tried my best to influence, to try and do what I think would have been a better solution and have the best use of that land, if we were going to have it as recreational facilities. Clearly the will of Council isn't there and the majority of you support spending \$5 million per baseball diamond on employment lands, losing taxes in perpetuity."

Speaking against the matter, Councillor Gaertner said she was "torn."

"I am torn because we don't have enough recreation land and we missed an opportunity in the 2C lands to buy a nice, flat piece of land from the developers," she said. "We need to provide the diamonds but, on the other hand, we're maybe in a very difficult financial situation because of COVID-19 and, because of that, I have to change the way I voted and agree with Councillor Gallo. I will be voting against this."

By Brock Weir