

Finalized Parks and Rec Master Plan considers community input

The Town of Aurora has finalized their Parks and Recreation Master Plan to guide decision-making over the next five years.

Steve Langlois, principal planner at Monteith Brown Planning Consultants, presented the final Parks and Recreation Master Plan at the General Committee meeting on June 6. The Town traditionally undertakes studies every five years to guide capital planning and assure alignment with community priorities, he said, adding that the finalized master plan will cover the next five years from 2023 to 2027.

It's an update to a plan that was prepared in 2016, received by Council at that time, takes into account growth, new growth factors, emerging participation, interests and public input, Langlois said.

The scope of the plan includes indoor recreation facilities, outdoor recreation facilities, parks and open spaces, and also the services that surround them.

A draft of the plan was presented to General Committee in early April this year before it was released for public input. The Town received written comments from staff and Council and over 100 comments through open house events and written submissions.

Outdoor recreation has been trending upward, Langlois said, noting that it has accelerated through the pandemic and has remained important to residents. Most importantly, residents want to be outside on parks and trails during all seasons and expect the spaces to be accessible.

Many comments centered on items around accessibility, which is, I think, always something that you're addressing through your policies, through your capital projects, but seeking greater consideration of accessibility around playgrounds, for example, and through just review of the planning work that you do, he said.

Other feedback discussed the need for suitable indoor swimming facilities for competitions, off-leash dog areas, more support for more trails, additional fitness classes, aquatic programs, and youth programming.

Speaking upon some other notable updates to the finalized Master Plan, he said they prioritized recommending the development of a gymnasium at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex (SARC) and evolution of options to expand gym-based programming.

In addition, the plan also updates pickleball court recommendations to reflect Council's recent direction on that matter and made minor edits to the vision and guiding principles.

What I can tell you is we have listened to these comments, reviewed and considered all of them within the plan that's in front of you today, Langlois said.

To implement each of the recommendations, the Master Plan contains 64 recommendations in Section 10.4. The priority and timing have been identified for each, they are supported by background research and consultation, but most do not have direct cost implications.

But we're always, as this Council would also support, be supportive of alternative funding and cost sharing opportunities, Langlois said.

Pointing out that there is still a need for suitable pickleball courts, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland noted that although the Town does have eight courts, four of the eight aren't usable and wouldn't be constituted as something that they would even play on for various reasons.

She emphasized that there is still a need for pickleball court space and said she is glad that there is a pilot project under way.

?I am very grateful that it does have a recommendation that we do deserve some dedicated courts of at least a minimum of six to actually make it viable. I think that's a very, very great recommendation, so I do appreciate that,? Councillor Gilliland said.

Adding on to Councillor Gilliland's point, Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese agreed that the Master Plan did a great job of capturing what the community wanted.

His one suggestion was regarding the wording around accessibility and ensuring that things are clarified a bit more to differentiate between accessibility to a trail or to a facility.

Noting that conversations surrounding the SARC gymnasium are still ongoing, Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson inquired about the Master Plan's recommendation to develop a gymnasium at SARC.

Langlois explained that relying on school gymnasiums often does not accommodate the Town's needs and noted the importance of gymnasium spaces which have been core components to community centers for decades.

Developing a gymnasium at SARC would help accommodate programs such as for basketball, indoor pickleball, or a variety of activities, especially since the current gymnasium at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex (AFLC) is often over-booked, he said.

?Your current space, you have one at the AFLC, it's really converted fitness space, so it's a bit undersized that doesn't necessarily meet the needs of all groups that are seeking to use it. It's also oversubscribed,? Langlois said.

The past masterplan from 2016 also recommended an addition of a gym to SARC, he said. Investing in developing the facility allows for more programs in the Town with low-cost operations and flexible scheduling.

?They're low cost operationally, because you have staff already present within the community. And they can be programmed daytime, evening, weekends, and generally throughout the year to sport camps and a variety of different spaces or a variety of different activities. So, I think most communities are working as proactively as they can to expand access to those types of spaces,? he said.

In response to a question from Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, Langlois explained why a strategy is recommended to implement a dog park.

?You need to determine whether you want access to water, parking? and I think what we heard from the community is that they're looking for something that's a little bit more localized. So, it might be with a neighborhood park, but there are many municipalities that have approached it this way by having a policy or strategy that gives you some defensibility and the ability to continue to evaluate sites as they're considered by council,? he said.

Based on his experience, most dog parks in Ontario are fenced, regulated, tend to be larger to accommodate both big and small dogs, supported by parking, proper waste disposal, shade, water, and benches.

Langlois noted that there are other models that the Town can look to, such as provincial parks with a dog beach that is not fenced but includes signage and enforced regulations.

Councillor Gaertner commented that the Town would likely benefit from fenced dog parks.

?I did see other dog parks that don't have fences, and I would say that's not something that we want to do in Aurora,? she said.

By Elisa Nguyen