

Focus on hockey and soccer just isn't cricket: Sports Plan

By Brock Weir

As the demographics of Aurora change over the next few years, so too should the way the Town looks at providing sports opportunities, according to the Town of Aurora's new Sports Plan.

The plan, which received tentative approval at Council earlier this month, is subject to a further round of talks this week as Council moves towards implementing some of the strategies in the document.

Rather than hiring a Sport Development Officer to oversee the implementation, Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, recommends Council go with a \$56,000 contract with Sport Aurora, the umbrella group which represents the majority of local sports teams and clubs, to carry out some of the initial priorities.

The Sports Plan suggests there is a shift coming in the types of sports Aurorans will embrace and, according to Mr. Downey, it is important for Aurora to be ahead of the curve.

“Aurora needs to pay attention to some of the changing demographics that are coming to this community, whether that is a changing age group [as] we move towards a senior population, whether that is a changing culture,” he said. “Many of the new residents that are moving into the Town of Aurora are of Asian descent. We have to start looking at what recreational opportunities might be available to them. We have a growing Russian population. How do we deal with some of their changing needs?”

“Traditionally, we built soccer fields, baseball diamonds and hockey rinks, and have built those in response to the desires of the user groups. We need to start looking at whether that is the plan for the future and whether or not we need to start looking at making some changes to those facilities and whether we need to start looking at the creation of some alternate facilities in order to address some of those changing cultural and demographic needs in response to the changing demographic patterns that are going on in Aurora.”

Citing the City of Brampton, Mr. Downey said they weren't paying attention to changing demographics and built facilities that are no longer being used as they once were.

The recommendation in the draft Sports Plan called for the training of staff and volunteers to work with “culturally diverse groups to better understand their sports needs and look to other communities within the Region that have responded to changing demographics by providing both culturally appropriate sports and an introduction to traditional Canadian sports.”

The wording of this recommendation, however, rankled Councillor Jeff Thom who suggested this be reworded to the training of staff and volunteers “to encourage and facilitate Aurorans of all backgrounds to participate in sports.”

“I can appreciate the need to look at best practices from other municipalities on reaching out to cultural backgrounds or immigrants or new Canadians with respect to having them be included in municipal activities, including sports, so I appreciate that,” he said. “[But] sports transcend culture, in my opinion. I think we do provide a very wide variety of sports that appeal to many culturally diverse backgrounds and I wouldn't characterize them as being traditional Canadian sports or being culturally appropriate sports. They are sports and they appeal to a wide variety of cultural backgrounds.

“There may be sports we don't currently offer that some groups in the community might want to see, but I just don't see why we have to approach it from a cultural basis. To me, if the Australian community is clamoring for Australian Rules football fields be constructed then we, as a Council, can certainly look for the need of such facilities and we can move forward as necessary. We do that all the time.”

Elsewhere in the sports plan, a healthy community through collaboration is key.

The Plan itself, borne out of a notice of motion from Councillor Michael Thompson, sets short, medium, and long-range goals for a healthy community as well as making Aurora a sports destination. A sport development officer was a position advocated for during the last municipal election by several candidates, including Councillor Thompson.

Among the recommendations within the plan are the development of a formal "Aurora Sports Policy" which delves into the full role sport plays in the community "from sports clubs, to health, to business" and how to address each level's responsibilities. It also calls for the reconstitution of Sport Aurora into a "Sport Council" with representation from the local sports community as a whole.

"You might have your work cut out for you on that particular recommendation," said Mayor Geoff Dawe to Mr. Downey as Council took its first sweep over the plan at the Committee Level.

Mr. Downey said there was no doubt that would be the case, but it is a principle he agrees with.

"I think that it is important that if we do have a Sports Council that it have representation of the sports community and not some of the sports community," said Mr. Downey. "That certainly is a discussion that is taking place in my office and with community groups.

"My goal would be to bring all the groups together and if we need a new executive structure in order to make that happen, then that is something we should be pursuing."