

Hallmark baseball diamonds questioned after price tag increases by nearly \$1 million

The transformation of lands just behind the former Hallmark building near Industrial Parkway South and Vandorf Sideroad into a complex of two baseball diamonds is being called into question after the price tag to make it happen has ballooned by nearly \$1 million.

Questions were raised around the Council table last week after receiving a report from the Parks Department stating that a budget increase of \$942,200, funded from reserves, would need to be approved to begin construction on the lands, which have been envisioned as a destination for local baseball players.

According to a report from Parks Manager Sarah Tienkamp the already-approved budget of \$3 million would need to be increased due to the rising costs of earthworks and site servicing. Unstable soils on the site have proved to be a problem, as has drainage, both of which has resulted in increased costs of approximately \$500,000 over the initial budget.

The potential budget increased raised alarm bells with Council members, who, at the Committee level, decided to delay their decision to proceed until January when staff present their Outdoor Fields Strategy report to Council, a report which could yield alternative uses for the Hallmark lands but Robin McDougall, Aurora's Director of Community Services, said a preliminary look at the upcoming report still indicates that Hallmark is the best location for the diamonds.

?You can see why some members of Council are upset and many stakeholders and residents as well,? said Councillor Harold Kim. ?We certainly feel like we're brides left at the altar. I feel like I planned a wedding for \$20,000 and all of a sudden the wedding planner tells you it is going to cost \$28,000 and that is the only alternative.?

Councillor Kim made the motion to defer the matter until the report can be presented at the January 14 General Committee meeting, a move which was supported by Councillor Rachel Gilliland who said she would like to see the plan before making a decision.

?I find we are talking about [a] plan that none of us has actually had a chance to look at it,? she said. ?To go on just a quick glance or just a general conversation and not [know] what the report is going to say, what these professional consultants are going to recommend, if it is not going to effect the bottom line?why not wait to see what [the plan] says.

?I don't know what this report is supposed to bring back

[but]

I would rather have a fulsome read of what this report says and what it directs. If it comes down to the end where, yes, the Hallmark Diamonds is the way to go, then we can have this conversation. If we're going to be revisiting this on the Fourteenth, it gives us time to move forward without delay and make a conscious decision on whether or not we want to go forward with this increase. It's a rather large increase in a budget and I would feel more comfortable knowing that I had read everything to make a sound decision.

Also supporting the deferral was Councillor John Gallo.

As a citizen-at-large before the 2018 Municipal Election, Councillor Gallo was a vocal critic of turning the Hallmark lands, acquired by the Town in the previous term of Council, from employment to recreational lands. Last week, he indicated his position remains largely the same but narrowly left the door open to the upcoming report changing his mind.

I'll support [the deferral to January 14] with a really big caveat that I am not sure anything is going to change because, as we just heard, there is support for having these baseball diamonds at Hallmark, he said. We're discussing price here. It has never been an issue of whether or not a report will tell us ball diamonds should go in that space. We're discussing a significant overage in price. I am happy to do it, but I just don't think it is really going to change much in terms of the decision we have to make.

Just so it is crystal clear the only reason I would be in favour of the deferral is because out of a sheer miracle something might come out of that document to convince me to spend another 25 to 30 per cent on the budget. As it stands now, and I have a long list of reasons why we should not be moving forward with this, and it should come [as] no surprise to anyone on this side of the table. I am not hopeful, but I am willing to give that chance to review that document and have a second look at this.

Other Council members, however, said they were more comfortable moving forward with the budget increase as the upcoming report will likely say the Hallmark lands are still the best option for baseball diamonds.

Questioning the value of deferring the matter, Councillor Michael Thompson, for instance, questioned what a four-week wait would ultimately achieve. He asked Ms. McDougall whether or not the upcoming report was based on the premise that the Hallmark lands were earmarked for baseball, or whether they were included as empty space available for all manner of sports fields.

Ms. McDougall replied that the consultants' goal was to see what pressures the Town was currently facing in providing sports fields for residents and their process confirmed that the Hallmark lands were a good fit for baseball diamonds rather than rectangular soccer or multipurpose fields.

?I just don't see what we're going to get out of it at this point,? agreed Mayor Tom Mrakas. ?Hearing some of the conversations around the table, hearing from staff, hearing what the original comments are coming out of that field strategy report that Ms. McDougall is just pulling out?I don't see how it is going to change the conversation that [we're supposed to be] having and that is the cost of it: a 30 per cent increase to the budget. I think, preferably, I would prefer us make that decision tonight. Let's get it done and make a decision. We owe it to our residents, we owe it to the stakeholders, we owe it to the organizations to make that decision tonight.

?Normally I would probably say we could defer it and have that field strategy. From all the comments I am hearing, I don't see how it is going to change any of our perspectives as far as what we make a decision from a budget perspective. That's why I would be against a deferral at this point.?

By Brock Weir