

Hallmark land decision should consider baseball, soccer needs: Council

By Brock Weir

Sports fields on 15 acres of municipally-owned land formerly part of Hallmark likely won't be ready until 2020, according to Town staff.

Timelines were outlined around the Council table last week by Al Downey, Director of Operations, as Council sent plans to transform the land into either two baseball diamonds, or a baseball diamond and soccer pitch, back to staff and Parks advocates after receiving some healthy feedback at the podium last week.

Sports advocates, including representatives from the Aurora Youth Soccer Club, Aurora Soccer Club, and the Aurora King Baseball Association (AKBA), lined up at Tuesday night's General Committee meeting to weigh in on the long-gestating plan to convert the lands, purchased by the Town for \$6 million in the last term of Council, into a facility addressing sports and recreation shortfalls.

"Both the 2010 and 2016 Master Plans identified a large deficit in the provision of community parkland to address the growing needs of the community, ensuring they have sufficient access to spaces that are capable of [a] range of recreational pursuits," said Sarah Tienkamp, Manager of Parks and Fleet, in a report to Council.

"It was recommended that additional rectangular, full-size fields were required to meet user needs. In addition, the Town was to continue to work with educational, industrial and other suitable partners to provide sports fields on non-municipal lands with adjustments to this supply be considered and reconciled utilizing existing or future lands. An additional baseball facility was also identified as a high priority. The plan suggested consultation with local ball associations to construct a new ball diamond to accommodate use by minor ball, adult and/or hardball users. The acquisition of the former Hallmark lands provides an opportunity for much needed facilities recommended in the Master Plan."

Soccer and baseball, however, as can be expected, have different visions on how this land should be used, giving Council members pause when facing a recommendation from staff to give the green light to beginning detailed design work.

"I need more information and I think we need to think of all the sports that are required," said Councillor John Abel, noting Aurora's continued efforts to secure Provincially-owned lands on Bloomington Road for a sports facility.

Knowing how the future will shake down on that potential deal could very much change the picture on how the Hallmark lands should be used, he argued.

Both Councillor Abel and Mayor Geoff Dawe suggested the recommendations "along with the feedback received Tuesday night from the respective sports clubs" be sent to members of the Parks, Recreation and Culture Advisory Committee for their input and review.

"I don't mind it going to Parks and Rec, but I do think we need to get staff to write a new report that outlines the concerns we heard," said Councillor Paul Pirri. "To use another sports analogy, what we're doing throughout this process right now is essentially starting a cage match where different organizations are pitted to go against each other to get a finite resource and really only one can win. It has been eight years, I believe, since we completed the Parks & Rec Master Plans, so I think getting an update on the numbers makes sense."

Moving this back to committee was also supported by Councillor Jeff Thom, who said an update on the Master Plan was needed, addressing diamond time shortages outlined by the Baseball Association.

A future report, he said, should include usage, registrations and rental rates for all the key players.

None of the issues on the table, argued Councillor Michael Thompson, are new ones. Delegates, he said, came to the podium over a year-and-a-half ago to outline their concerns and these issues should have been referred to the Committee at the time.

"When we purchased the land, we presented a report to Council in response to some of the questions of what can we put on those lands and what can it hold," Mr. Downey told Council members. "We had presented a drawing or concept to Council in September of 2016, which is part of your report identifying a layout of baseball diamond and soccer pitch so Council had some idea from a footprint perspective on what you could potentially put on those lands. In April, a year ago, a delegation from the AKBA came forward to Council and Council gave staff direction to come to the 2018 Capital Budget with two baseball diamonds. There was no mention of trying to combine soccer pitches, you wanted a capital budget that indicated two ball diamonds."

"When we presented that to budget, Council wanted to know a breakdown of the costs. There was some concern with the amount of money that was being spent on these facilities as well as if there was an opportunity to put a soccer pitch on these lands. We have come back with a report that has addressed the concerns Council asked us to look at during the budget deliberations."

The key takeaway from last Tuesday's meeting, said Councillor Thompson, is that Aurora is "a very active community."

?We need more fields, we need more facilities, we need more land and we need it sooner rather than later,? he said, suggesting a special meeting of the Parks, Recreation & Culture Committee be convened to discuss the matter in the month ahead. ?I will support the deferral but I don't want to see us delay it. I look forward to learning the future of the Bloomington lands sooner rather than later. We have a lot of needs and we need to have a bit of a larger scale plan to accommodate everybody.?

Councillor Tom Mrakas added another issue that needs to be discussed is potential soccer shortfalls if soccer fields on the Magna lands are taken away as Frank Stronach continues his application to redevelop adjacent lands.

?We need to have that information to make the best decision for our community and all our sports teams,? said Councillor Mrakas.

?At the end of the day this is a win for our sports community because we are committed to building sports fields on this land. It is just a matter of building the right ones. Once we have all that information, we will make the right decision.?