

Hallmark lands go to baseball in Council U-turn

By Brock Weir

Athletes will now get two baseball diamonds on the Hallmark Lands after Council made a U-turn last week on how the property should use.

Earlier this summer, Council struck what many local lawmakers said was a 'compromise', deciding to build one multipurpose rectangular field and one senior baseball diamond after reaching an impasse on which sports group was in greater need of field hours.

Each sports group made their respective passionate pitches to Council, but Council decided to go down the middle of the road.

This approach, however, hit a speedbump last week when a report from Sarah Tienkamp, Aurora's Manager of Parks and Fleet, said a multipurpose sports field would not fit on the land in the ideal direction if coupled with a diamond.

Instead, staff recommended the multipurpose field idea be scrapped and replaced with a natural turf soccer field, which could be oriented in the ideal north-south direction, a direction intended to keep the setting sun out of players' eyes and thus extend playing hours.

Staff's report raised many eyebrows around the table at the previous week's General Committee meeting, and this continued last Tuesday, with some Council members stating this information coming so late in the game was 'circumventing' their direction.

'I have problems procedurally with how this has come back to us,' said Councillor Tom Mrakas. 'I think this has been a way to circumvent the process and the decision made by the majority of Council. I am disappointed. I guess we will have to deal with this as we move forward in election season.'

These sentiments were echoed by Councillor Sandra Humfries, who added: 'I am very disappointed with the report in general and how the information came to us in between reports. I wouldn't want to say this publicly but I am very disappointed. This is not the quality of work I want to see in the future.'

Councillor Harold Kim was on the same page, noting when Council voted to 'compromise' on the Hallmark lands with one field and one diamond, what they described as a 'one and one' solution, that this decision was based on a certain set of information. Since that time, other pieces of the puzzle have come into play, including an extra \$1.2 million needed to make a multipurpose field a reality.

While baseball ultimately won the day, soccer was not without its supporters.

Before the final resolution was reached, Councillor Paul Pirri put forward a motion that would have accepted staff's recommendation for one baseball diamond and one natural turf soccer pitch.

'I think we have debated this ad nauseum over the last month and a half or so,' said Councillor Pirri.

But, this ongoing debate was fine for Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

'I think this is so very important to both the soccer groups and baseball, so if we have to speak about it on and on I think that is the right thing to do,' she said.

When his motion failed, Councillor Pirri put two diamonds on the table.

'It would have been my preference for us to move forward with one and one [but rather than nothing getting built] I will be in favour of this,' he said.

OPTIONS STILL AVAILABLE FOR MULTIPURPOSE FIELDS

Although Council voted 5 ? 3 on two baseball diamonds for the Hallmark lands (Councillor John Abel, an opponent of using the Hallmark Lands, previously designated as employment lands for any other purpose, was not at the meeting), their decision was influenced, in part, by assurances from Mayor Geoff Dawe and staff that there would be opportunities down the road to address the needs of local soccer clubs and other sports teams that would benefit from a multipurpose field.

Among these opportunities, said Mayor Dawe, Provincially-held land on Bloomington Road near Cardinal Carter Catholic High School.

Mayor Dawe told Council he and the Town have discussed the lands with Aurora's two MPPs, Christine Elliott and Michael Parsa, and there have been 'some indications there is a possibility of moving forward sooner rather than later on that.'

Should that come to fruition, he said those lands would accommodate between three and five multipurpose fields.

This was reiterated by Robin McDougall, Director of Community Services.

‘We know that the lands for Magna are coming off our repertoire and we have to look at our future plan,’ she said. ‘Looking at that long range accommodations and trying to accommodate soccer in a multipurpose facility that has multiple fields is an ideal scenario and Bloomington would serve as that opportunity.’

This was music to the ears of Councillor Harold Kim, who said the decision to move forward with two baseball diamonds did not mean that soccer would be left out of the mix.

‘No one likes to wait, but there's something to be said in good things come to those who do,’ he said. ‘We're only taking about another year. Baseball has been waiting a long time [for space], they have been suffering in terms of enrolment,’ he said. ‘I think we made the right choice. It is unfortunate in terms of how it progressed, but I think Council made the right choice in the end.’