

Indoor tennis facility plan set to be nixed by Council

By Brock Weir

Fall has arrived and Aurora's tennis enthusiasts are now starting to think about taking their favourite sport indoors before the winter.

Those hoping for a new indoor tennis facility here in Aurora to pick up where Timberlane is set to leave off next year, could be disappointed as Council prepares to hit the brakes on a proposal to build a new, multi-purpose indoor tennis facility at Stewart Burnett Park.

Indoor tennis has long been proposed for the park on Aurora's east side, with a proposal coming forward last year for a tennis 'bubble'. Council voted to hold off on making a decision on the bubble, however, in favour of exploring a rigid structure.

The results of that exploration, however, raised eyebrows around the Council table.

Going into last week's General Committee meeting, they faced a recommendation for the initial phase of the consultation process clocking in at \$200,000.

Staff recommend that a design consultant be engaged to determine what exactly this facility will be comprised of, said Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, in his report to Council. There are several facility providers on the market offering a wide range of alternative designs. In the absence of sole sourcing a provider, Council will be required to identify the required elements of this facility and any ancillary components, The design consultant can then research appropriate providers and solicit community input to ensure that all requests are addressed.

The consultant will present options and cost estimates to Council on the initial phase. Council will be requested to approve a preferred design option and recommend an option for the construction and operation of the approved facility.

While four different options were presented to Council in the report, they were not explored further as members balked at the \$200,000 price tag just for consultant work.

A couple of phrases came to mind when I was going through this whole thing, said Mayor Geoffrey Dawe. We asked Mr. Downey to investigate a facility [and] put out a call for tender. Council, as a result of that, endorsed a third party to design, build, operate and finance the facility of Stewart Burnett Park back in June 2013. The tender was released in December and we had replies in January. The recommended recipient was Canadian Winter Tennis.

According to Mr. Downey, had that option been approved, Aurora could have made \$241,833 at the end of the 20 year deal with Canadian Winter Tennis. This, said Mayor Dawe, should have been more of a factor in considering whether to look at an alternate project. He also said moving towards a rigid, multi-purpose structure for indoor tennis was a move which flummoxed organizers of the Rogers Cup, who called his office looking for further information.

We have a situation where we have a proposal that can go forward and have a tennis facility, Mayor Dawe concluded. If we had actually awarded the tender back when we had these original discussions, it probably would have been up and ready by next spring. Now, we have just delayed it. If we go forward with this, it is just going to cost us a bunch more money. I don't see the value to our taxpayers. I think we need to rethink what we're doing here.

We need to be moving forward with the original concept we came forward with. It is not going to cost the Town any money. Indeed, it is going to generate income.

A similar view was expressed by Councillor Evelyn Buck, who said she was 'aghast' Council did not go with the original contract

last year. She said it did not sit well with her that Council changed course after a delegation from the Aurora Community Tennis Club while others in the community were looking for a facility.

'[Tennis players] just want to keep doing what they love to do,' she said. 'Why we decided not to go forward after we had done all that work to accommodate [the club] I will never understand that. I am not sure Council should be setting aside sensible decisions because one individual comes forward and says, 'We don't like that.''

Last year's recommendation, however, was not so sensible to Councillor John Gallo, who said the original intention was to go out to tender and engage the public on whether they wanted a tennis bubble or a rigid structure. That, he said, didn't happen.

'I was just as shocked at the ticket price for this consulting,' said Councillor Gallo. 'I certainly would not support it with the previous road we were going and I was happy we didn't proceed that way because I am one that feels we could have done much better. I am not interested in spending tax dollars on this and I believe that we can accomplish what we're trying to accomplish without spending tax dollars towards this.

'We are so late in this term, I am not sure why this took so long to get this. We could have had this discussion far before this. I am not interested in pursuing this and, at this point, I think it is for the next Council to decide [going] forward.'