

New multi-use sports field may be coming to Sheppard's Bush

A proposed partnership between the Town and the Aurora Barbarians Rugby Football Club (ABRFC) may lead to the construction of a new multi-use sports field intended to promote rugby and the future growth of sports participation.

At Council's General Committee Meeting on January 17, lawmakers received a delegation for a proposed memorandum of understanding that would establish a long-term relationship between the Town and ABRFC.

Councillors expressed that they were excited for the opportunity to expand the Town's sports portfolio and for the donated investment capital to fund construction for a new turf.

"We need to make sure that from a financial standpoint, everything makes sense for our residents, but I think it's exciting when we can provide more opportunities for our youth in our community to be able to excel in sports," said Mayor Tom Mrakas. "I think something like this would go a long way [in] cementing Aurora's legacy when it comes to rugby as well."

In attendance at the meeting were Steve Hall, co-president of the Euro Barbarians for 30 years and member of ABRFC for 40, John Reich, Chair of the Planning Committee, and former president of ABRFC, and Keith Scott, Director of Community Relations and Junior Development for the club.

"We're looking for an opportunity to partner with the Town to enhance its inventory of sports fields and give the residents more opportunity to participate in rugby activities," said Reich. "We're delighted to be able to come into the Town with investment capital to help the Town build its inventory of assets."

With a donation estimated up to one million dollars, ABRFC would cover expenses to construct a second all-weather turf field with floodlights within the Sheppard's Bush property suitable for high-level rugby and other activities as deemed useful by the Town's parks and recreation department.

In addition, ABRFC would cover costs to build a limited bleacher seating and "green" building to provide expanded washroom facilities, change rooms for both the club and other permit holders, which the Town does not currently have in any outdoor fields, and a private space for the Barbarians acting as their clubhouse and administrative office for year-round use.

The concept drawing for the clubhouse currently envisions 600-square feet of public meeting space and a 600 square foot viewing deck as well as 900 square feet of private space for the club to showcase their history and act as their administrative office.

"Adding a second full sized turf field in one location with change rooms would be a game changer for generating sport tourism opportunities for all field sports, including, of course, rugby festivals and tournaments," Reich said.

While continuing to pay for standard user fees on the existing and new turf, the club would be provided priority access to the new field based on an agreed schedule with Aurora's Parks and Recreation Department and access to other fields at Sheppard's Bush.

Maintenance of the turf facility would be provided by the Town. ABRFC would provide any specific rugby equipment required and maintain and furnish its reserved areas. The field and non-reserved areas of the building would be shared and made available to other permit holders.

The funding for the potential construction of a multi-use sports field came from a disposition in 2021 when ABRFC together with Rugby Ontario decided to decentralize as partner and shareholder at Fletchers Field, a rugby complex at Woodbine and 19th Avenue in York Region.

ABRFC accepted an unsolicited offer from the Town of Markham to acquire their property at Fletcher's Fields, in which the

proceeds now allow the club to pursue a regional approach to rugby development in Aurora.

Presently there is only one rugby pitch in the Town's inventory located at Sheppard's Bush, marked for football and soccer, said Reich.

ABRFC has also used the turf facility at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School through a partnership with the York Catholic District School Board, in addition to other green spaces at ESC Renaissance located at Bathurst and Bloomington.

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo said that he is supportive of discussions to move forward with the partnership and that he would like to see further reports comparing the pros and cons of replacing old fields with a new one.

Reich replied that the objective of this project is to ensure that every field sport grows in capacity as a result of the new sports turf.

?It's not just for rugby. We need a home over here to support sport broadly in this community.?

In response to a question by Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, Reich said that they have not contemplated putting up a dome covering for winter use, but that it is a possibility if they incorporate the intermediate soccer fields which would provide additional space to put up a dome covering, and if they gain more funding.

?Rugby has been present in Aurora for over 50 years starting with the York County Rugby Club in the 1970s, progressing to the Aurora Rugby Club in 1995. And for the last 20-plus years, the roar of Barbarians. The Barbarians is a club for all with a welcoming environment, for boys and girls, men and women from ages six to 60 and all body types and skill sets,? said Reich.

?Pre-COVID, we had an active membership of over 400 this most recent year we were just over 300 after COVID and we're delighted to see our pre-registration numbers for 2023 rising back up to those earlier levels.?

?We're proud to call Aurora home and we will always strive to build our club from within the club within Town boundaries while welcoming any participant looking for a healthy, inclusive environment to learn and joy in excel at the great sport of rugby,? said Reich.

By Elisa Nguyen