

## New playground for Town Park should be accessible for all residents: advocate

Alison Hughes grew up a stone's throw from Tamarac Green, a popular greenspace she came to love as a place where she and her friends could gather and have a great time.

But, as much as Hughes, who relies on a wheelchair, came to love the park, some of it was just out of reach ? both as a child and as a resident who now brings her own children to a place that is an inextricable part of her own childhood in Aurora.

?The park's inaccessibility, not my disability, has always posed barriers and created safety risks for me to use that space,? says Hughes, who says was eager to provide input when the Town redesigned the park about six years ago. ?At the time, despite emails, face-to-face meetings and connecting with [the Town's] Accessibility Advisor, the project seemed to steamroll ahead. Despite the pause with the pandemic to rethink design, I'm left with a park that leaves me on the sidelines and leaves much to be desired.?

Now that the Town of Aurora is looking to redesign the playground at Town Park in the heart of Aurora's historic downtown core, Hughes is determined that the new build will leave no one behind.

Hughes' comments came at last week's Committee of the Whole meeting, where she implored Council to not only approve a budget increase of \$132,000 to make it happen ? bringing the estimated total bill to \$532,000 ? but also to improve and upgrade the surface of the nearby splash pad to \$90,700, an increase of \$15,700 to the budget.

?The goal of this improvement project is to create a new and fully accessible playground space, with features that provide opportunities for both junior and senior children aged 18 months to 12 years of age to play within an intentionally-designed space that incorporates both users and caregivers' accessibility needs,? said Matthew Volpintesta, Manager of Parks and Fleet, in a report to Council. ?This upgraded playground will serve as one of four accessible playgrounds, as recommended in each quadrant of the Town.

?To avoid making any assumptions and ensuring all design components were considered,? a number of public consultation opportunities were rolled out, along with consultation with ?passionate community members, some of whom spoke firsthand about personal accessibility challenges.?

Features coming out of this consultation included a junior and senior child combination play structure with included accessible ramps for users and child supervisors; a full swing set with junior and single child options, with an accessible swing seat; two side-by-side double slides for junior and senior kids; an interactive play board with touch and turn features; spinning wheel features suitable for individuals using wheelchairs; and barrier-free rubber surfacing.

As welcome as those features are, Hughes says they don't quite go far enough and Aurora has the opportunity to set the standard for York Region.

?I was giddy when I heard Town Park was slated for redesign,? she said. ?I need to applaud our Parks team for exercising patience, listening to feedback, pausing and making tweaks to their initial design a few times over. I have been relentless in my pursuit to ensure we have the best park in Aurora and perhaps all of York Region?. The renderings are markedly improved from the initial designs proposed when the Town put out the community survey for feedback. I was disheartened to see that a swing design specifically for youth wheelchair users was left out. I am hopeful this is still a consideration. Expecting folks to help someone transfer is simply unacceptable and sometimes not possible or safe. It is worth noting there are four known such swings in all of Ontario, none in York Region. What a great opportunity and a pivotal moment to pause and make sure we make this a priority.

?I appreciate the small footprint at Town Park, but my personal view is quality and intentionality over quantity of elements. While I care about a swing on a personal level, I am asking for this on behalf of every child who I see myself in who deserves this. With this park as a hub for events, for gatherings and in proximity to our almost complete Town Square, this is the park?let's show kids and

adults, frankly, who are wheelchair users in Aurora and York Region that they belong and they have a right to play.?

The accessible swing in question, says Sara Tienkamp, Aurora's Director of Operational Services, could be accommodated if some of the amenities originally proposed for the playground are ?changed out.?

The swing could cost approximately \$33,000.

Grant opportunities being pursued by the Town could bring a further \$60,000 into the project to offset costs.

?I would hope there's not going to be any hesitation in trying to meet the needs of what we need for that Town Park area playground,? said Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese. ?In that area of Town? within two years, we're going to have a significant population increase through Berczy Street which is going to create a tremendous load for that. I just want to make sure we have the capacity for the additional residents who are going to be there. If there is a need to spend a little bit more on that park to make sure it is the feature that we need.?

Council could make a final decision as early as the June 25 Council meeting.

**By Brock Weir**