

New proposal delays decision on Hallmark Lands

Local sports teams will have a while to wait before Council makes a final decision on whether to go ahead with two new baseball diamonds on Aurora's Hallmark Lands.

Councillors went into last week's General Committee meeting poised to review a staff recommendation to go ahead with developing two diamonds on the site, located near Industrial Parkway South and Vandorf Sideroad, at a total cost of \$3.942 million, an increase of \$942,200 since the project was initially approved.

Council faced the same recommendation late last year, but local lawmakers held off on making a final decision until this month ? just enough time for Shaun McGuire of the Aurora King Baseball Association (AKBA) to make a potentially game-changing proposal: an indoor baseball dome.

?As we know, the Hallmark property is approximately 13 acres and approximately two acres of the property would be required [to accommodate] a proposed 60,000 square foot dome with a 3,000 square foot clubhouse attached,? Mr. McGuire told Council, elaborating on the proposal, and looking to the Aurora Sports Dome on Industrial Parkway North as an example of what could be. ?My extensive travel through the US seeing various baseball facilities, domes are used quite frequently?for baseball training. This baseball facility would offer a 60,000 square foot turf field, three full-size retractable mesh-surrounded infields, one full-size open field, ten batting cages with pitching machines and batting tees, and three pitching mounts.

?This baseball facility would be built with a clubhouse that would include office space and a boardroom. This would be the home of the AKBA head office. It would also include a weight room, bathrooms and changerooms for both men and women. If built with a basement on the clubhouse, there would be ample storage for AKBA to meet all their storage needs.?

If the proposal came to pass, opportunities for youth baseball play could be increased as would opportunities for the AKBA and other baseball groups to offer year-round conditioning and training.

The facility could also serve as a multipurpose facility that could offer opportunities for additional sports and teams, he added.

?The facility would attract baseball and softball associations, teams and individuals looking to train at an elite level,? said McGuire. ?This would allow for parents to shop and support local vendors while they wait for their children to be trained. The facility would staff a team of up to 15 full and part-time employees as well as during the summer months there would be the potential to run climate-controlled youth camps within the dome.?

A dome of this nature would be ?fully funded? by private investors with no cost to the Town except for use of the two acres of land

within the parcel, he concluded, when pressed by Councillor Harold Kim on any possible financial implications on the Town. Sweetening the pot, Mr. McGuire speculated that going forward with the proposal would halve the Town's costs on developing the balance of the acreage for baseball. The Town would subsequently be responsible for grading, electrical and other servicing requirements on-site.

"This throws a whole new wrench into the project and I am very interested in this proposal," said Councillor Rachel Gilliland following Mr. McGuire's presentation, noting that the proposal, as presented, is geared more towards competitive teams practicing in the winter and all year round.

But Councillor Kim's questions continued on the financial track, questioning whether the private group exploring this opportunity already had financing in place. Mr. McGuire said they did, which prompted a further question from Mayor Tom Mrakas.

"Financing is in there, an outside group and organization is going to come in and build this multimillion-dollar facility out of the goodness of their heart?" asked the Mayor, further inquiring whether the proposal includes the group leasing the land from the Town.

"They would be making money, obviously, off the back of it," replied Mr. McGuire. "There would be a commercial end to it where they would earn an income coming from the facility. The question of leasing the land is something on the next step, this presentation being the first step as it is pretty new coming to Council. Everything has fallen into place real fast."

With the devil stuck in the details, Council voted to give the proposal some time to gel before making any further financial commitments on the development of Hallmark, passing Councillor Kim's motion to refer the matter back to staff for a further report on a potential training facility.

"Right now, we don't have other options," said Councillor Kim. "We might as well take a good look at it and have staff study this option, get the financials, get all the details and see if it is a viable option. If it is not, Council might make other plans."

By Brock Weir