

New Sports Plan needed to address 'evolving needs' of athletic community

Aurora's Sports Plan was intended to guide local athletic developments from 2015 to 2020, but it now requires an overhaul to meet the current needs of the community.

The latest update in the Town's Sports Plan was recently presented by Council by Hailey Jones, Specialist in Sports and Community Development for the Town of Aurora, and her report was formally received by Council last week.

Speaking to Council's Committee of the Whole meeting earlier in June, Jones outlined a number of successes in the latest iteration of the plan, particularly when it came to facilitating equity in the sports sphere, many of which were realized in 2023.

But, at the same time, she said world events and social trends have changed the landscape.

'In 2023, the Town of Aurora took a significant step forward with the approval of the Parks & Recreation Master Plan (PRMP) Update, signalling a recommitment to enhancing the recreational landscape for residents,' said Jones in the report. 'Building upon this momentum, it is now time to focus on updating the Sports Plan. Recognizing the dynamic nature of our community's sporting landscape, the Town acknowledges that the current Sport Plan, designed to provide guidance from 2015 to 2020, no longer adequately reflects the evolving needs of our local sporting organizations and the broader community.'

'While the initial Sports Plan has contributed to positive change and opportunities, recent global events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and social justice movements within sports, have reshaped the sport landscape in profound ways. These shifts highlight the urgency of revisiting our approach to sport and recreation to ensure inclusivity, safety and alignment with contemporary values.'

Priorities include equitable access to recreational opportunities, the development of coaching standards, best practices and educational components.

Speaking to Council, continued work towards Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) was a focus for Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, himself the President of Sport Aurora, which represents the needs of close to 60 local sports clubs.

He asked Jones to outline some 'top-of-mind' elements that would reflect the current needs of the sports community.

'One of the biggest changes that we're making is removing DEI as a bucket and actually putting DEI as the overall plan,' Jones replied. 'All of the priorities will [see] focus through DEI instead of it being a separate priority. Therefore, the other priorities don't touch Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Going through an entire pandemic, coming out the other side, looking at some of the examples that we saw through the Black Lives Matter movement, looking at the LGBT2S+ community, looking at grants and some of the needs of our local sporting organizations, we want to take a different approach to make sure our website is up to date, make sure we help local sporting organizations find these pieces and looking at the Town as being part of that connective tissue that brings everything together. I think the Town has a really unique and special opportunity to be able to provide those.'

'One thing reads loud and clear is they're looking for a different level of support. They don't want the Town to tell us how to run their business' but on the other hand, being able to provide those resources so they can run their businesses as needed'. It is our responsibility to help organizations understand some of the changing legislation as well and those changes in legislation were not around when the sport plan was first initiated.'

In order for the plan to be successful, it can't be 'forced'. Instead, it needs to be a 'meaningful, mindful and intentional approach'.

'Some of the areas they're struggling with is around recruitment of a diverse population and things of that nature. That is where the approach is coming from. It has been identified when we went out in an RFP for a Sport Plan update these are some of the things we need to examine and want to make sure is not lost in this update.'

Overall, Council members indicated they were happy with the Sport Plan and all it has achieved to date.

‘It’s nice to hear not only are our own residents and sporting organizations benefiting from all we’re doing, but it is also serving as a springboard for other municipalities to deliver similar results for their residents as well,’ said Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, who noted municipalities are looking to Aurora as an example on this front.

‘A phenomenal job that you and everyone else does,’ added Mayor Mrakas, addressing Jones. ‘You’re putting Aurora at the forefront. We’re standing out front as leaders and it is because of the work that you and the team does. It’s quite clear that you have a passion for sport, but you have a passion for this Town and we appreciate that. I think our residents do, too, as well as our sports organizations.’

By Brock Weir