

Next steps in Cultural Precinct plan due January 24



By Brock Weir

As the late afternoon sun beat down on Friday, a familiar ritual played out.

Families laced up their skates, secured their hockey gear, and grabbed their pucks for some valuable time outside on the ice.

It is the quintessential Canadian scene and one which has played out at Town Park for decades.

Now, 150 years after its foundation as a community destination, possible enhancements to the Park itself and the surrounding amenities of Aurora's Cultural Precinct are scheduled to come under the microscope this month.

When Council returns from its winter break on January 24, one of the first items due to be tackled are the next steps in realising the vision of Aurora's Cultural Precinct.

Last month, Council voted to knock down the former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Aurora Seniors' Centre on Victoria Street, pending the relocation of the existing tenants, as well as exploring the repurposing of the historic Aurora Armoury on Town Park's northeast corner.

Both of these items are set to be revisited a week Tuesday, as are possible enhancements to Town Park.

While Council voted to largely keep the current configuration of Town Park the way it is, throwing out proposals from consultants to eliminate the park's ball diamond and relocate the popular band shell, they have left the door open to enhancing what is already in place.

'What we heard at the (Area Ratepayers' Meeting) was the baseball diamond is actually very well used,' said Fausto Filipetto, Policy Planner for the Town of Aurora. 'We believe we have heard quite clearly to preserve Town Park, to not re-design, and spend the money on maintenance and enhancements to the existing features. If Council [chooses] this option, the possible next steps would be to consider specific enhancements to Town Park and also to communicate to the community that the main features within the park, such as the ball diamond, the band shell, etc., will remain in Town Park.'

This is exactly what Council chose, but their decision came on the heels of a passionate presentation from local historian David Heard who presented a number of ideas on how the park's current configuration could be enhanced, including ways to make it more of an all-season destination.

'I think our Town Park is excellent,' said Councillor Jeff Thom. 'We have lots of programming there now, but we can make it better. I think the ball diamond is essential [and] a pretty key component. It brings sports into Town Park and brings all sorts of different elements. People who are into sports can come to Town Park and people who are into theatre and music and all sorts of different activities [have the Band Shell]. For me, I think the elements are there, but maybe we can improve on those elements.'

A similar view was offered by Councillor Sandra Humfryes, who said add-ons such as more outdoor seating and a platform near the band shell could prove to be 'a huge draw.'

'I think the baseball diamond is essential to stay and there is lots of heritage there,' she said. 'The Aurora Diggers softball team goes back a long way and there would be a lot of people I think would be pretty disappointed if we took that away. There is lots and lots of heritage there and I would not change that at all.'

For Councillor Wendy Gaertner, maintaining the baseball diamond was an important element to consider when Aurorans talk about Aurora's small town feeling. A similar view was offered by Councillor John Abel, who said maintaining the diamond would have other off-shoot benefits.

It's great to see the feedback and the consensus here is to leave it alone, said Councillor Abel. Baseball is an institution that has been going on for 35 years and they are the type of people you want coming into your Downtown because they typically want to get a bite to eat, have a beverage and tell all the great stories about themselves. It is a great idea for that alone.

The consensus, however, was not fully unanimous, as some Council members said they did see benefits which could be realised if the ball diamond was relocated.

The only area where I am open to potentially moving or changing the usage is the baseball diamond, said Councillor Harold Kim. I know a lot of people would like that as is, which is fine, but [you could have] a blank slate. The things that are in Town Park have been engrained in our heads for such a long time that we just can't possibly exist without it. I'm not saying concrete it over [but] the only thing I have to say is I am open to the baseball diamond not being a fixture.

Added Mayor Geoff Dawe: I would support it if we could find a better spot for the baseball diamond, but I wouldn't be in support of it right now. I like the idea of expanding and I do appreciate Mr. Heard's idea of expanding the current band shell, especially by adding some additional space on the back. I think that makes a lot of sense because when you're over there in the summer and the bands are there, they have a change room that is probably smaller than the size of the van they use to bring their equipment.

Enhancing the Town Park is the way to go. I know there have been some talks of having an artificial surface which could be used in the summer for either roller blading or skating, a seating area for concerts. I don't know about changing the orientation because that would be awfully expensive from what you would get out of it, but maybe you can add some kind of facility to the front of the stage where you can re-orient. Overall I probably wouldn't change the structure of Town Park as it stands right now.