

Pandemic's impact on gender and participation examined through sports lens

The global pandemic has affected just about every aspect of our lives, including sports participation.

As the Town of Aurora continues the development of its Sport Plan, it's being looked at through a new lens: how the pandemic has impacted participation in sport, particularly for women.

Erin Hamilton, the Town's lead on developing the Sports Plan, presented her latest update to Council this month and noted that due to public health restrictions participation is down right across the board. But, she said, it is being felt particularly strongly in one specific area.

“It is unclear if the reduction in participation rates is going to be a permanent reduction or if they are temporary until more people are comfortable returning to sport once we move further out from the pandemic than we currently are,” said Ms. Hamilton. “Although the report done by Canadian Women in Sport shows that 25 per cent of females that were involved in sport pre-pandemic have no intention of returning to sport post-pandemic. That stat right there is a concern as participation rates amongst females was lower to begin with.”

To help address this problem, three initiatives have been spearheaded by her department.

The first is a sport leadership course for female high school students facilitated online in conjunction with the school ASK Online. Targeted at Grade 12 students, participating youth receive a high school credit and a variety of training certifications along the way, including in coaching, first aid training, and lesson planning.

“If we can provide them with the tools and resources, as well as some community experience, it will increase their confidence to be able to step into those roles once they move out of their athlete roles,” said Ms. Hamilton.

Secondly, local sports organizations have launched Female Only programs with focuses on sport and physical literacy, as well as building connections, friendships and confidence. This goes hand in hand with the third pillar, See What She Can Do, which looks at the various challenges experienced by female coaches.

“We continue to monitor what is happening in the pandemic, supporting our sport organizations as best we can under the circumstances, and looking at the rest of the winter season, we'll look for spring and summer, what they will be permitted to do (under present public health guidelines)? What percentage of members will return and how do we plan adequately for our upcoming season? We'll focus on partnership development, re-engaging the community in sport and build some awareness of our opportunities that exist [for] sport in the community and share with people that it is safe to get back into sport and encourage people to get active.

“We'll continue to work on and have a report coming in the next few months as it relates to our Sports Tourism Strategy, sport for persons with a disability, in particular persons with physical disabilities is a major gap in the community, so how do we engage them in sport?”

The latest update was received warmly by Council, with Councillor Wendy Gaertner praising Ms. Hamilton and her team for keeping things going “despite the hardship of the time.”

“It is a very impressive list of work that has been done, especially during these challenging times when so much is going on and so many things are challenged these days,” echoed Councillor Michael Thompson.

Added Mayor Mrakas: “The work you have done with regards to gender equity is just outstanding. I sat in on some of those meetings and discussions and it is just incredible what we're doing; another example of how we're leading the way and we have no one to thank but you and the rest of staff for the work you guys are doing.”

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter