

Partnership between Town, rugby club could bring more sport opportunities to Aurora

A potential partnership between the Town of Aurora and the Aurora Barbarians Rugby Club could bring more sport opportunities to residents as early as late fall of 2024.

Sitting at the Committee level last week, Council tentatively approved looking deeper into an agreement between the municipality and the Barbarians on a new artificial turf field at Sheppard's Bush.

The Barbarians initially approached the Town with a proposal in January, one that would keep the rugby club's home base in Aurora.

The resulting recommendation before lawmakers last week calls for the construction of a second artificial turf field at Sheppard's Bush, along the north side of one already on site, and a clubhouse to replace the current washroom building just off the Industrial Parkway South parking lot.

If the deal is inked and the project approved at budget time this fall, the Barbarians are prepared to contribute \$1 million to the construction of the field and shoulder the full cost of the clubhouse, which is estimated to clock in around \$750,000.

According to John Firman, Aurora's Manager of Business Support, "costs associated with a similarly-sized artificial turf, including consulting, bleachers, lighting, fencing, etc., are estimated at approximately \$2.5 - \$2.8 million."

While the potential new field would eliminate four soccer fields, staff said the pitches in question are "not utilized as often as the other fields at this site, and are more readily replaceable through new turf field design, replacing existing facilities, and relocation of permits" to other locations.

"The club truly appreciates the consideration given to our proposal," said John Reich of the Aurora Barbarians in a delegation to Committee last week, supporting the above recommendation. "The report reflects an understanding of the needs of the club as we look for a new home within the confines of Aurora and a willingness to work with the Town to add inventory to the multi-use fields available to the community". We appreciate the diligence of [the Town's Community Services team] to investigate the needs of all the sport organizations that use the facility, in particular the youth soccer community.

"The club was pleased to see reference to the offer we have made to the Town and the latest iteration of the Town's Parks & Recreation Master Plan as an opportunity to co-fund upgrades to the inventory of multi-use fields for community use. We believe the Town, the rugby club, and other users will benefit from two turf fields with lights in one location and served by men's and women's changerooms."

Two fields side-by-side, he added, would be a "boon to the Town's sport tourism initiatives" and the clubhouse's washrooms and changerooms would be available to "all field permit users."

Following Reich's delegation, Firman said next steps in making this partnership a reality would be coming to an agreement with the Ontario Heritage Trust (OHT), which owns the Sheppard's Bush property.

While discussions need to continue, and a further look into costs need to be considered before any field is approved in the 2024 budget, Firman said talks between the Town and the OHT have been positive.

"Their initial reaction seems open," he said. "Reaction to their feedback is cautiously optimistic, they were receptive to the idea. They did raise some initial concerns as to the impact of the heritage value of the land because we would be putting an artificial surface on. [Parks Manager Sara Tienkamp] proposed some remedial actions that they received very well, such as invasive species remediation, additional tree planting, bird boxes, and some other natural habitat restorative services. All of that will be minimal cost

in the grand scope of the project.?

Another bonus that was greeted warmly by the OHT was the Barbarians' intention to build any future clubhouse to LEED Gold environmental certification, he added.

The matter is expected to come before Council this week for further discussion, but on July 4, Councillors said further information was needed ahead of 2024 budget deliberations.

?I really want this to happen because I think it is a fantastic deal for everyone ? you guys and us,? said Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, addressing both staff and Barbarians representatives. ?I am being cautious from where I sit because I don't want to be in a position where we approve a budget, start going forward, start spending money and things break down.?

Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson said while he was supportive of exploring the partnership, he was cautious as the field hinges on a third party ? the OHT.

?I would hate to see this bogged down by, for lack of a better term, bureaucracy and the momentum kind of stalls,? said Councillor Thompson. ?What can we do to ensure it is moving along at a reasonable pace so come our budget discussions in the fall we would be prepared to make this decision and ultimately, if Council approves, get shovels in the ground as soon as possible.?

Mayor Tom Mrakas billed the proposal as a ?great opportunity as presented? and, if it moves forward as presented, ?a win for the community and the taxpayers.?

A similar view was offered by Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim who said the Barbarians have been a ?great partner? in the process.

Noting that the Barbarians are prepared to contribute \$1 million to field construction, he questioned how the cost of maintenance would be covered going forward.

?We're at the stage where the next steps involve entering into agreements,? said Firman. ?We don't want to take that next step without getting Council's direction to do so. As far as operating costs [the Barbarian's contribution] is for the initial construction of the field. Our experience has been [a] standard life expectancy is about 10- years for a turf field [and] our experience has been more around 12 ? 13 years. After the initial costs of construction, the Barbarians would still pay facility rental fees? and that would be just like any other group using the field. That would be their contribution to future repairs. The Town would then assume all maintenance responsibilities and capital costs for field replacement down the road beyond initial construction from the Barbarians.?

Concluding the discussion, Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, who chaired last week's meeting, said it was a ?great example? of a partnership between the Town and a non-profit.

?It shows a lot of cooperation and I am particularly happy with the work you have done to juggle all of the pieces here to get cooperation with the Aurora Youth Soccer Club? who may be losing? some fields. It's a good model of cooperating in terms of trying to build a quality sport community.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter