

Playground plan for Jubilee Park to triple in cost ? if all bells, whistles approved



By Brock Weir

A \$150,000 plan to build an accessible playground in the recently rechristened Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park could hit a snag this week as incorporating all suggestions from the public could make the price tag more than triple in size.

Councillors are facing a recommendation this week to approve the design of the park's accessible playground, while the cost itself is put forward for further consideration by the next Council as part of their 2015 Budget Process.

According to a report before Councillors at last week's General Committee meeting, a new accessibility playground would be built at the park, near its main entrance off John West Way. The east end of the park would then be filled with 'sensory features' such as a labyrinth, trails, and other features, with a slightly downsized soccer pitch separating the two.

Additional features would include a 'natural play' area with log balance beams, a 'reflexology footpath', raised planters so users can get a good look at flowers and other plants, and a 'Serenity fountain.'

Council had previously approved \$150,000 for the construction of the accessibility playground, but Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, noted in his report to Council that this figure did not include any specific features. With the full menu incorporated into the design up for approval, this figure has since ballooned to \$570,000.

'Staff believe [this is] a realistic cost for this very specialized play opportunity,' he said. 'In addition, this project represents a significant increase in ongoing maintenance which is well above the current maintenance standards employed in the existing park. In the event that this current design is approved and funded, it will be necessary to increase the annual Parks Division Operation budget by a corresponding amount to ensure that sufficient resources are available to maintain sufficient standards.'

A rubberized play surface, he added, could account for as much as \$60,000 of this figure.

Taking a first stab at the design at last week's General Committee meeting, some Councillors balked at the increased price tag, but others said this was a ballpark figure which could either be phased in over time, or see features hacked out of the equation to make the final numbers more palatable.

Mr. Downey added that a park could be accommodated at the \$150,000 level, but it leaves 'concerns' from members of the public, who came out to a meeting in January, off the table.

For Councillor Paul Pirri, who initially conceived the idea for Diamond Jubilee Park, an essential piece of information needed before

moving forward was a full breakdown in costs for each playground feature so they could have a better idea of how much could be accommodated, and at what price. However, he said he still believed that given the demographics of the John West Way community, a mix of adult and senior residences, as well as family townhomes, an accessible playground is the right way forward.

“I can understand people's concerns over sticker shock that this is a little bit more expensive than we budgeted for, but if you look at other facilities across York Region, Newmarket came in close to the same price point,” he said. “In my view, this is something very much needed in the community.”

Others, however, said they were supportive of an accessible playground in principle, but not at this particular location. When Council decided to rename the park, Councillor Evelyn Buck said she envisioned something more along the lines of a rose garden in partnership with the Aurora Garden and Horticultural Society to set the park apart from the others. When the idea came forward for an accessible playground, it was not something she said she was going to oppose, but the price tag is getting in the way.

“\$150,000 was pretty steep for a playground,” she said. “We are talking about spending twice as much as a normal playground price tag for special facilities. If we're going to do something like that, and spend that amount of money, there needs to be more thought on where it should be.”

For Councillor John Gallo, who lives across the street from the Park, further analysis was needed to make sure this was the right location.

“I think it is a great idea to have this, but I completely disagree with the choice of location and I certainly won't be supporting even pushing this through to next year's budget,” said Councillor Gallo. “The correct thing to do is engage the consultant to advise Council on where the best location for this type of project would be.”

At the end of the day, however, the recommendation to move forward was approved by Committee, before it comes to Council this week for ratification. Those in support of the idea said it is important to make the park a reality in terms of inclusiveness.

“This truly would be a reflection of the pride and the inclusivity of our community,” said Councillor John Abel. “Those that don't want to share that vision or that idea will find reasons not to [such as] it is not big enough, it is not the right location, it is too expensive [but] I really want to move forward with this accessibility.”

Added Mayor Geoffrey Dawe: “We're falling all over ourselves to say we want an accessible park as long as it is not close to me. It almost sounds like a public planning meeting ? not in my back yard and not in your back yard, but it has to be somewhere! The voice of that public meeting was that people were in favour of moving forward on having this park. There didn't seem to be a lot of negativity in that particular meeting with respect to location. There were a couple of people who weren't pleased, but I think the general reaction was very positive in terms of the location.”