

Sports clubs underscore pressing need for fields, diamonds

By Brock Weir

As Council moves to set a use for the Hallmark lands this week, one thing is clear for Aurora's sports clubs: they need more elbow room.

Various teams and clubs made their pitch to members of Aurora's Parks, Recreation & Culture Advisory Committee earlier this month ahead of Council's vote last week.

The meeting was a time for groups to make their final pitches after Council referred the Hallmark issue to the Committee for their added input. At the meeting, municipal director Robin McDougall presented Committee members with the hard numbers on the usage of existing sports fields and swelling membership numbers for each club that regularly uses municipal facilities.

It was also an opportunity, however, to hear from groups that hadn't yet had a chance to weigh in.

"I clearly have 60 to 65 people on a wait list every single year, we're growing four to five teams every single season and we have had to obtain permits in Newmarket and Markham because there aren't any senior diamonds available," said Judy Robar of the Aurora Mixed Slo Pitch League, which was founded in 2015. "We used to use the Complex, we used to use Optimist Park, they are gone to the youth, which is great and I am hoping the youth continue to grow as a league, but there are no senior diamonds to accommodate. We are a huge growing sport and I am the only coed league in Aurora. We're really hoping to get some more diamonds so we can stay within the Town."

Costs of the Hallmark lands, on the other hand, were top of mind with Roy Cohen, President of the Aurora Youth Soccer Club, who suggested adding a baseball diamond to Machell Park to relieve some of the pressure on groups like the Aurora King Baseball Association.

"If we used Machell and adding a baseball diamond there or two and making that a showcase facility, it would be a lot less," said Mr. Cohen. "The Hallmark could go for temporary soccer fields until you find a proper economic use for it where it is not as taxing. \$7.5 million for two baseball diamonds sounds expensive to me, and that is what I would look at - a more prudent, fiscally responsible avenue, because that is a lot of money for two baseball diamonds."

The costs of the Hallmark land were acknowledged at the meeting by a number of Council members in attendance, including Councillor Michael Thompson, who said while the land is "expensive," Council has been struggling to purchase lands adequate for sports needs.

"When opportunities came forward, we have done our best because there have been situations where we have been in bidding wars with developers and that is not always the best use of tax dollars," said Councillor Thompson. "In this particular situation, whether it is a multipurpose field or artificial turf, baseball, or a bricks and mortar building, land cost to me was always going to be a [part of it]."

Mayor Dawe, on the other hand, took up the suggestion that needs could be addressed further by exploring the possibility of carving out soccer fields on Moraine lands and lands on the floodplain on which little can be built except for parking lots.

"If anyone is going to treat the land properly, it should be the municipality to actually be sensitive to the land use and, at the same time, be able to use that land for recreational purposes," said Mayor Dawe. "It is definitely worth exploring and I am not sure how we would even start that, to be frank, but there is a huge percentage of Aurora that is Moraine and you can carve out a lot of fields wherever they may be. You may not be able to put the kind of [built facilities on it] but maybe for some areas that is not needed as much."