

Sports field shortfall to rise by nearly 20 in 'not too distant future'?

By Brock Weir

Aurora has been short on sports fields for nearly a decade, and this shortfall is only expected to get worse in the 'not too distant future,' according to Town Staff.

According to a report in front of Council this week, 19 sports fields on lands currently owned by the Stronach Group (otherwise known as the Magna Fields) will be lost to local sports groups in the coming years, pending the redevelopment of the property.

This will only make a bad situation worse, according to Town Staff, who are laying the groundwork for a new study looking at developing a field development strategy for the Town of Aurora.

'A comprehensive field development strategy is needed to help ensure that the Town is properly positioned to meet the existing and future outdoor sports field needs for the community,' said John Firman, Manager of Business Support for the Town. 'This will help maximize opportunities with existing assets and provide informed recommendations for the acquisition/development of new assets. Thorough consultation with all stakeholders will ensure that all relevant input is considered in the development of this strategy.'

'During Council deliberations and discussions with various sport field user groups regarding the development of the Hallmark Lands, Council identified the need for a comprehensive outdoor field development strategy. With conflicting information from user groups and extensive research required to properly develop a strategy, staff recommended an independent consultant be retained to conduct this research in [developing] a strategy.'

'In addition to existing challenges in meeting community sports fields needs, other contributing factors towards the need for a comprehensive strategy include the fact that almost half the sports fields are owned by third parties with no guarantee of the future availability to the Town. We also know that the 19 fields on the Stronach Group property will be lost in the not too distant future and will need to be replaced.'

The study will look at the inventory of existing fields and spaces, the needs of community user groups as well as future demographic projections. The results will make recommendations on repurposing some existing assets, possible land acquisition opportunities, 'alternative strategies' for multiuse assets, and recommendations for the replacement of third-party fields expected to be lost down the road.

While Mr. Firman notes that recommendations in each of these areas will be coming forward to Council this fall, local lawmakers gave the tentative

green light to beginning the outdoor field development strategy last week, along with signing off on \$55,000 earmarked for the project within the 2019 Budget.

‘This was such a huge topic for us [and] a huge problem for us the last term,’ said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. ‘When I was reading the report, I thought \$55,000 sounds like an okay amount of money to try and solve this.’

It is already clear Aurora doesn't have enough land, said Councillor Gaertner, predicting that will be one of the report's findings, but she questioned whether two-storey sports fields could be considered as part of the report.

While she said she has seen some examples of this for tennis, Robin McDougal, Director of Community Services, said she was not aware of two-tier developments that might meet Aurora's needs.

‘We acknowledge the fact that land is limited, so that is why [this study will look at] other partnership opportunities [like] school board relationships,’ said Ms. McDougall. ‘We know from an investment perspective replacing a natural turf with an artificial turf, we can significantly increase its usability and functionality. That is something we may be needing to look at, wherever there may be an investment in a soccer field, whether it be a partnership with a school or not, I think the artificial turf is a route we may need to consider. To replace those lands we're going to lose, particularly when Magna fields come offline.’

To that end, Councillor Gaertner said she was ‘shocked’ by the number of fields Aurora is set to lose.

‘This is really concerning,’ she said, before asking whether the Community Services Department had an idea on when this loss would come to pass.

‘We haven't heard any particulars around the dates of when those lands will move forward for development,’ said Ms. McDougall. ‘We're just trying to be progressive and get ahead of it, if we can.’