

Sports groups make pitch for Hallmark building

By Brock Weir and Jake Courtepatte

To some, the former Hallmark Cards plant on Vandorf Road and Industrial Parkway South might seem simply an empty box of a warehouse. Local coaches, however, are looking far outside the box and are seeking municipal help to make their vision a reality.

Sport Aurora, an umbrella group of local sports teams, made a pitch to Council last week looking for help from Town Hall in securing the expansive building for a new multipurpose sports facility, hosting space for baseball, tennis, volleyball, gymnastics, and a host of other activities.

Adjacent to the Hallmark building is a patch of vacant land recently acquired by the Town. Although uses for the land in question will be earmarked in the upcoming new Parks and Recreation Master Plan, Aurora has been grappling for years with a lack of field space for local sports clubs, particularly soccer. With this land in play, going the extra mile to secure the Hallmark building is a natural fit for the municipality, according to Stephen Kimmerer, President of Sport Aurora.

"This has been a part of Aurora for a number of years, but it has been empty for a number of years too," he said. "We believe it has a future as a sports and athletics centre. We're hoping that it will help a lot of our non-profit and for-profit sports and recreation providers who are in need of adequate training and competition space. This building is available for lease and possibly lease-to-own. Its potential is only limited by engineering solutions and financial boundaries."

Joined at the podium by Bruce Stafford, founder of Storm Volleyball, the two men's pitch included calls for Council to direct staff to look into the feasibility of a partnership with local sports and recreation groups to purchase, lease, or enter into a lease-to-own agreement with the current providers and, once secure, provide rental space, customized specialty training and competition space, to benefit athletes across Aurora.

Sections of the building avail themselves to specific sports, they noted. In addition to baseball space, volleyball and tennis courts, there is also the potential for a 50 foot swimming pool.

"Anything that is multipurpose, this place could theoretically host," said Mr. Kimmerer. "What makes it even more interesting is this building is adjacent to land [the Town] already owns. If we were to vision this being a sports centre, we could have lights, a track, a soccer pitch, a baseball diamond - all this would fit in with some engineering. You have no residential around it, so you could put lights in and it could be quite an amazing sports centre."

Council ultimately voted to receive the comments of the two men, tasking Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation to report back to Council on their proposal.

Among their concerns, however, were the cost of renovating the existing building to tailor it to their ambitious vision. A number of factors, architecturally and otherwise, need to be considered before the numbers can be crunched, said Mr. Stafford. An engineering component would need to take a look at which elements can be removed and what can stay.

"One of the things we're looking at right now is if we can put something forward that would lock the building up for us to do further investigation to confirm people who want to get involved, people who want to sign on the dotted line, to have permanent space, whether it be a 10 plus 10 lease rather than permitting it from the Town," said Mr. Stafford. "That is our vision. We don't want to permit it from the Town because then it is hard to put your own money into it. Using my own example of volleyball, I would like to have something going there for 20 or 30 years. If I can put in volleyball courts and know I am paying the lease to the Town, that is the route I want to take."

Looking over what was at the table, Council saw the merit in looking further. Councillor Paul Pirri, for instance, said there was "definitely a lot of potential" in what they proposed, but whether that "potential can be actualized" tells the tale. Councillor Michael

Thompson added he saw similar opportunities when he learned Hallmark was selling up but, at the time, something like this wasn't possible and he looked forward to a report back to Council.

Following the meeting, the proponents said they were pleased with the reception their pitch received.

?You could see a lot of big smiles on faces when we presented,? said Mr. Stafford. ?They seemed excited about the proposal. From a volleyball perspective, we cannot find buildings that have high enough ceilings. We've been looking for a place of our own to get out of the schools for well over ten years. All we usually find are eighteen-foot ceiling warehouses with a million columns.?