

The Price is Wrong for auctioning off naming rights to new Aurora parks: Council

By Brock Weir

Auctioning off the naming rights to new neighbourhood parks and parkettes has been a long-standing way to raise money and awareness for many community groups and organizations over the years, including Southlake Regional Health Centre. But is the prestige of a local park bearing the name of yourself or a loved one in perpetuity wearing thin? That's the question Council members are grappling with after recent naming auctions have garnered little more than an opening bid.

A policy will soon be coming forward on land donation practices after Mayor Geoff Dawe and other Council members said the most recent auction failed to raise a flurry of bids.

These concerns were raised during a vote last week on a laundry list of names for an equally long laundry list of parks and parkettes in new neighbourhoods that are soon to become operational.

Among the parkettes that raised eyebrows were the Richard and Sandra Gladden Park on DeGraaf Crescent, which was the result of the winning bid at the 2013 Southlake Gala and the Jean Marie Iacovette Parkette on Thomas Phillips Drive, the selection of the winning bidder last year.

“The Public Facilities Naming Policy 1997 ensures consistency in the recommendations being submitted for consideration,” said Parks Manager Sara Tienkamp in her report to Council. “One of the goals outlined in the policy is to remember/retain the memories of past residents, facilities or events which depict our heritage.”

Among the criteria are the geographic or historical significance of the specific location, historical or prominent individuals, families and groups, a significant donation that was instrumental in making the parkland a reality, or a name appropriate to the park's function.

“Nine different park blocks in the Town are unnamed, of which six have been developed and two are anticipated to have construction completed in 2018,” said Ms. Tienkamp. “The majority of the park blocks are part of the 2C development area. In accordance with corporate policy on naming facilities and parks, staff has compiled a list of suggested names to possibly be used in the naming of the parks with no formal designation. All of the names presented have been researched by Cultural Services staff for their historical significance as original landowners or who had prominent connection to the lands.”

Those suggested names with historical significance include Trent Park on Alex Brodie Drive, which carries the name of the family that owned the original farmland from 1882 to 1941, Edward Coltham Park on William Graham Drive, so named in honour of the family who owned the land from 1900-1963 and its patriarch who was described in a contemporary obituary in the Aurora Banner as “one of the best known farmers in the section” highly respected by all.

Johnathan Bales Parkette on Joseph Hartman Crescent honours the original settler of the land, as does Benjamin Pearson Parkette on Woodland Hills Boulevard and John Ashton Parkette on Vines Place.

“We should be going with the staff recommendations for these reports,” said Councillor Jeff Thom at last Tuesday's Council meeting after issues were raised at the Committee level the previous week. “If we decide, as a Council, that we want to create a policy for the auctioning off of naming rights for various Town assets, we should come up with that policy first before we begin to allocate Town assets that are going to be named off in that fashion. I think if we're going to create some sort of process whereby we can have different groups auction off certain assets that we decide, we should have a policy in place before we do that so we don't get into trouble.”

Councillor Michael Thompson offered a similar perspective.

“I do support the idea that we have to be cautious about reserving these parks for future fundraising events because we have no policy around it,” he said. “I think it is a good idea in general, but as we have seen with the Hoedown and the Mayor's Golf Tournament, there are more organizations than there are the ability to fund. You need to have a policy around it, otherwise there is a whole host of organizations out there within the community that would love to have a fundraising event like that to raise funds for whatever needed projects they have.”

“I think we should focus on developing a policy for that and, for the time being, follow through on the staff recommendations before us so this development can move forward. Once we have that policy in place, then start talking about preserving future parks [for fundraising purposes].”

And that is exactly what is going to happen.

While CAO Doug Nadorozny said there is a policy for park naming and a donation process, there is more work to be done to ensure there are “appropriate minimums” in place when a park is being auctioned off “so it doesn't go for a nominal value.”

?We're looking at a sliding scale based on the size of the park and its presence in the community to make sure there is an appropriate amount of money that goes back to the community,? he said.

Council's decision also confirmed the name of ?Thomas Coates Park? as the new name for Mavrinac Park, which formally opened with a ceremony on Tuesday afternoon.