

Thelma Fielding Park is destination for community, sport excellence



As Onna Okeke looked over the new artificial turf field just steps away from St. Anne's School, where she's a Grade 12 student, she saw a ?new place for girls' sports to prosper and absolutely dominate.?

Such is the vision for Thelma Fielding Park, which was dedicated Thursday afternoon in honour of the first woman elected to Aurora Council in 1951 ? a fitting name for a park just a stone's throw away from St. Anne's, York Region's only independent all-girls school, which is dedicated to ?empowering girls to be courageous learners and compassionate citizens who live and lead with wisdom.?

Boasting a fully-equipped and accessible playground and a multi-sport artificial turf field, the facility is the result of a joint venture between the Town, the school, and Shining Hill, which is developing the surrounding area in the northwest quadrant of St. John's Sideroad and Yonge Street.

?This park and this turf field is what happens when we work together,? said Mayor Tom Mrakas, at the September 11 opening, which was also attended by Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, and Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo. ?The Town had two incredible partners on this project, both stepping up to deliver something truly special. Without St. Anne's and Shining Hill, we wouldn't be standing here. I want to thank you both, not just for your support in building this park, but for your broader commitment to Aurora.

?We all know how important parks and green spaces are for our well-being, for our health, for our kids, and for giving us places to connect with friends and neighbors, and Thelma Fielding Park really has it all: a splash pad, pickleball courts, basketball and ball hockey, a playground, shaded areas, and walking paths. It's designed to be a true community hub, a place where residents of all ages can come together. This park, where we are right now standing, also includes a new turf field that gives our leagues, as well as St. Anne's, another space to play and grow, and that also helps strengthen us as a regional sports hub, which in turn brings more people to Aurora, and helps support our wonderful local businesses.?

The Mayor hailed the field as a place where the next generation of athletes can ?train and develop right here in our community.?

?I also think it's especially meaningful that this park is named after Thelma Fielding ? Aurora's first female elected official,? he continued. ?To have her name carried forward here beside a school dedicated to empowering young women feels like a perfect fit.

It's a reminder of the leaders who shaped our past, and the young people who will shape our future.?

This was a sentiment echoed by Sabrina D'Angelo, St. Anne's Head of School, who said the name was suggested by the Town, a move which ?represents the power of partnership, persistence and vision.?

?The Town's choice to honor a trailblazer who mirrors the courage we hope to instill in our girls, all of you sitting there today, sends a powerful message to our students, that leadership takes many forms and their voices matter, not only here, but across this community,? she said, before addressing students in the stands.

?Last winter, St. Anne's launched its mission: empowering girls to be courageous learners and compassionate citizens who live and lead with wisdom. Your experience in Dunin House and now on this field brings this mission to life. It's more than turf; it's a stage, a training ground, a place to grow, compete, to fall, to rise, and to keep going. It symbolizes your courage, your resilience, your leadership, and it promises that your community, that would be all of us, will always be there cheering you on from the sidelines.?

This sense of community was underscored by Mark Etherington, who serves on the Boards of both St. Anne's School and its partner school, St. Andrew's College.

Community, he said, takes many shapes, but there's power in it.

?Community brings people, enthusiasm, and ideas together that allow us to forge exceptional outcomes, just like this park,? he said. ?To all of you, and to everyone who worked tirelessly to imagine and build this spectacular field, I thank you on behalf of the SAC and SAS Board. While it is a community park, it is now also the proud home field of the St. Anne Cygnets, and how good does that sound? In short order, we'll see in action what has been dreamt of since this project started, a place where the lore of St. Anne's sisterhood continues to be built.

?We'll see the girls taking the field, cleats flying over turf, and SAS jerseys proudly worn. We'll see footballs thrown, soccer balls kicked, and teammates having each other's backs. We'll hear shouts of encouragement, of whistles blowing, and of high fives echoing through the grandstand?We will see camaraderie, we will see resilience, we will see teamwork. No doubt, we will see wins and championships and victories as our fierce students take to their home field to play the sports that they are passionate about, with their Cygnet sisters by their sides. In essence, we will see community, our special community, continue to grow and develop right before our eyes on this spectacular turf.?

Okeke, who was taken by the vivid hue of the artificial turf underfoot, underscored sport's power of development.

The athletic champ said when she first considered flag football in her second year, her father questioned whether the sport was ?too aggressive? for a girl.

?I thought about it ? and after not too much thinking, I joined the flag football team and, by my second year on the team, we won CESA gold,? she said. ?Even though my dad comes from a good place, it reinforces a harmful stigma that discourages many female athletes from feeling confident or even trying. The idea that girls can't play football, hockey, or other male-dominated sports because they're too aggressive is still a common belief. This mindset limits opportunities for girls to succeed in these activities, as it reduces the chances for them to learn or even try these sports. That's why it's so important that St. Anne's has such a wide variety of sports options, even the ones traditionally played only by men.

?With teams such as flag football, rugby, field hockey, and more, SAS is no stranger to breaking societal norms regarding female athleticism and proficiency. This turf represents a significant step toward closing the gap for female athletes by creating even more opportunities for us to, of course, dominate. As we stand here on this incredible new turf, let it serve as more than just a field. Let it be a reminder of how far we've come and how much further we're going to go. For every girl who has ever been told a sport was too aggressive, this field proves otherwise. It proves that strength, skill, and passion have no gender, and with this turf, St. Anne's athletes aren't just going to participate. We're going to lead, inspire, and absolutely, again, dominate. The future of female athletics

here is brighter than the turf is green. And trust me, that's saying something!?

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