

Williams move sparks ideas for new and old sites



By Brock Weir

The York Region School Board's plan to move Dr. G. W. Williams Secondary School to a new building in Aurora's northeast might be at least five years away, but that hasn't stopped the Town from getting a bid in on what the new ? and old ? school sites might mean for the community.

This week, Aurora will consider two motions from Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillor Tom Mrakas respectively that will take a close look at what the new Williams site might look like, as well as how its current Dunning Avenue site might be transformed in the future.

Should Council pass Mayor Dawe's motion this week, municipal staff will begin discussions with the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) on visioning the new school site on Bayview at Borealis with an eye for ?shared spaces? like a community gymnasium.

?One of the things that always comes up is the availability of various facilities in parts of the Town that are maybe not well-served,? says Mayor Dawe. ?[This site] is not that far from the SARC and there are lots of parks there, but we're always looking at additional gym facilities or additional community space for meetings. This [motion] really formalizes working with the Board to see how we can work together.?

As an example of previous collaborations, Mayor Dawe cites the multiuse sports field at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School as a prime example. It's a partnership which saw the York Catholic District School Board share the costs of a new field with the Town and, in return, both parties get to use it.

?The [YRDSB] is looking at getting their public consultation (on the new school site) going very soon and I would think we should start looking at these discussions sooner rather than later,? he says.

But, once the Williams community ultimately heads east, what should be done with the venerable Dunning Avenue site? The YRDSB has previously said they intend to keep the building for ?administrative purposes,? but Councillor Mrakas has another idea. Last year, Aurora put funding in place to begin the design process of a new multipurpose recreation facility in the south end of Town, in a location floated to be just west of Bloomington Road and Yonge on disused land owned by the Province of Ontario. With a Provincial election ? and a possible change in government ? in the offing, Councillor Mrakas suggests the Dunning Avenue site, along with some of the current historical amenities already on site, would make a good alternative location, something he describes as a ?Centre of Excellence.?

Councillor Mrakas, in his own motion, calls on the Town to begin talks with the Board to partner on just such a ?Centre of Excellence? ? a move, he says, would not only provide much-needed sports facilities, but serve as an anchor for Aurora's downtown core.

?We should look at this as a location to partner with the school board [as] it could become more efficient as far as costs, and the Board would be able to get use out of a facility we're looking at creating, one that could possibly have a 50m pool, a full indoor track, and a lot of things that could be beneficial to both parties,? says Councillor Mrakas.

‘I think it is our duty to explore all opportunities. We don’t have any land for this multi-use facility. We could hear back from the Board and if they are not interested at all, end of story. If they are interested, we can keep having discussions with them and Sport Aurora while we look at what happens. If there is a change in Provincial government, they might decide to do something else with the [Bloomington] land.’

While a 50m swimming pool and a full indoor track are among the needs Sport Aurora has identified for Aurora’s future multi-purpose facility, reps from the umbrella organization which represents dozens of Aurora’s sports teams are more keen on the concept than the title ‘Centre of Excellence.’

‘You can’t just build a Centre of Excellence,’ says Stephen Kimmerer, President of Sport Aurora. ‘You have to build great facilities with excellent programming and funding. Those are three things that need to happen. We think it is great that they are doing some research and a multipurpose facility that is going to help as many sports as possible would [be great and with adequate facilities] it becomes a de-facto Centre of Excellence because everybody – north, south, east and west – will come and it will become a sport tourist destination.’

Sport Aurora’s Reg Chappell agrees.

If the Town had one full-size 50 metre pool, it would be full within six months, such is the demand for local pool times, he says.

‘Competitive swimming in Ontario has grown from about 6,600 back in 2005 to over 20,000 competitive swimmers, let alone those who are learning to swim,’ says Mr. Chappell. ‘This multipurpose facility is the starting point with huge needs, and trying to bring it all together to fit the fine points of individual needs.’

The amount of land available on the Williams site would be ideal, they agree, and with the school building already on site, Mr. Kimmerer says there are a number of opportunities for rooms for Aurora’s various sports and community groups – such as the Aurora Bridge Club – who have been clamouring for space.

‘Both [Mayor Dawe and Councillor Mrakas] proposals make great sense,’ says Mr. Kimmerer. ‘We are in absolute support of either one. What we’re thrilled with is somebody is investigating the options because if we don’t get Bloomington, you have to have a Plan B, C, and D. If Aurora is going to grow as has been predicted, we are sorely under-facilitated. We don’t have the space for all those people and those programs. The sooner we make a decision and start putting shovels in the ground, the better off we’ll be.’