

Aurora-King baseball takes over premiere ball diamond

By Brock Weir

May is here, and that means Aurora and King are in the throes of baseball season, but as the Aurora Jays step up to the plate at Stewart Burnett field this week, they might be doing so with an extra degree of pride.

Council voted 6-2 in favour of giving the Aurora King Baseball Association a \$7,000 grant for the work they do in maintaining the field and keeping everything up to snuff for the hundreds of baseball players that pass through the facility and the association every year.

Providing compensation to the baseball club for the work they do has been an issue that has been the subject of considerable Council debate in recent weeks. Not wanting to leave the grass to grow under their feet, as it were, the Club set about their routine as Council made up its mind.

"We are prepared to take it over at any point in time," said club president Dave Giroux, appearing at Council last week responding to questions from Councillor Harold Kim on when they ultimately needed a decision. "On May 1, baseball basically gets started in all ball diamonds in the Region. The sooner the better is the decision to be made so we can actually put [what we need] in place."

According to Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation Services, his department traditionally maintains all aspects of the facilities such as these, but the development of Stewart Burnett Park changed the playing field as the Association would like to see a higher standard on the diamond above and beyond existing service levels.

To this end, Council went into last week's meeting facing a recommendation to provide up to \$7,000 compensation to the club for doing that work.

However, as Council still is yet to finalize this year's budget, the recommendation was met with some opposition from Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who ultimately voted against the request.

In recent budget meetings, Council tasked staff with finding an extra \$100,000 in revenues to lessen the tax impact on residents. Approving this request, said Mayor Dawe, would only add to their hunt for finding that revenue elsewhere.

"This is a very difficult position because it is a premiere field and we wanted it to be," said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. "In a way, it is setting a precedent if we allow this. The Mayor has a good point: this might not be the year we can approve this, and it pains me to say this."

Others, however, had no such qualms. In their view, this was a premiere field thanks in no small part to the efforts of the AKBA and Aurora would be getting a return on its investment.

"To me, this looks like a very fair exchange," said Councillor Sandra Humfries of the "payback" Aurora would get in this investment in the AKBA, as well as man hours that would be saved by the Town's Parks and Recreation Department. "It solidifies this is the right target and the right way forward. It is allowing us to improve service levels across the board."

The Aurora-King Baseball Association emerged last year following a merger of the two clubs.

In last year's roster, Mr. Giroux said there were 660 Aurora residents within the organization playing at all levels, and 175 members for King.