

Draft Parks & Rec plan continues to take shape

Aurora's Parks and Recreation Master Plan guides decision-making over the next five years, from 2023 to 2027.

The Master Plan project began in the summer of 2022. Created by Monteith Brown Planning Consultants, the plan provides a foundation of research on local demographics and conducts needs assessments in relation to upgrades, new development, and existing gaps to provide the Town with diverse opportunities for physical activity and social engagement.

Todd Brown, President and Principal Planner at Monteith Brown, presented the draft master plan in Council Chambers on Tuesday April 4, 2023, saying that they are looking to test the plan with the public and stakeholders before it is approved by Council.

“Essentially you update your Master Plan every five years. And so, it takes into account new growth factors recognizing intensification and other legislation that is occurring that may impact our growth, participation interests and public input,” Brown said.

The scope of the plan includes indoor recreation facilities such as aquatic centers, arenas, and gymnasiums. It also includes outdoor recreation facilities such as sports fields, playgrounds, sport courts, parks and open spaces.

Aurora has demonstrated a steady population growth for several decades, says the report. As of April 2022, population estimates indicate the Town has reached a population of 64,100.

The Parks and Recreation department conducted a community survey to gather information about the Town's preferences and had 544 total responses where 455 were from residents.

They also held a pop-up booth where they engaged with over 75 participants at the Farmers' Market, and hosted stakeholder workshops with 15 groups that represented thousands of residents. Youth, staff, and council consultation continue to be sought along with written comments and feedback.

81 per cent of survey respondents found that walking and hiking is the most popular Parks and Recreation activity. 41 per cent preferred special events in parks, 43 per cent preferred cycling, and 40 per cent preferring indoor swimming.

“What those generally have in common is that many of those facilities are things that people can schedule on their own time, they don't sign up for an activity or commit to a 16-week program, so we see that really as a trend right across the province. And that has been occurring for probably a good decade or more,” said Brown.

The community survey also found that 44 per cent of respondents say they're unable to participate as often as they would like. 60 per cent attributed the main barriers to participation to a lack of desired facilities or programs in the Town, 33 per cent said that the program or activity is full, and 28 per cent said they lack time.

Brown said they identified that outdoor recreation facilities had the largest gap in terms of expectations. 86 per cent felt that they were important but only 60 per cent said they were satisfied.

“I think because of COVID, we had a lot more people outside, in parks and on trails, and perhaps their expectations were not quite met or what they thought they would be at that time,” he said.

A majority of respondents said they would like the Town to prioritize investments on outdoor recreation facilities such as nature trails, park washrooms, multi-use fitness trails, parkland acquisition, and playgrounds.

The Master Plan drafts several recommendations for outdoor recreation facilities including updating the Town's Sports Field

Development Strategy, gaps in playgrounds throughout the community, and a potential outdoor pickleball complex.

Despite the fast-growing popularity of pickleball, Brown said it's important to watch out for over-building courts in the short term.

"Pickleball, for those of you unaware, is one of the fastest growing sports in Canada. It has tremendous demand. It really had the highest demand through the older adult population but we're seeing it taught in high schools, and so forth. So, that demand continues to grow. But it's a matter of making sure that we don't over build in the short term, so it's more a matter of recommending the six plus courts now and monitor that and see how well they're utilized," he said.

For indoor recreation facilities, it is recommended Aurora aim to pursue options for securing land to support a community centre in the southwest to include an indoor pool, gymnasium, walking track and more. Furthermore, it is suggested they prepare a study to consider arena needs and options for repurposing the AFLC rink into dryland, non-ice activity space.

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese noted that the Aquatics Advisory Group has found that swimming is a highly valued activity in the community and sought further context on the Master plan's recommendation to invest in 25-meter pool facilities instead of 50-meter pools for competitive swimming.

Brown replied that the required 50-meter pool for competitive swimming is beyond the community's need and more so an investment to boost tourism and sports in the Town.

"If the Town wanted to move towards a 50-metre pool, then that would be something that is beyond a community need and more of a decision of whether you would want to invest in something that is more for tourism, creating competition with your swimmers, and also seeking partners to help fund that because once you get into a facility of that scale, a regular pool will run a fairly significant operating deficit; a 50-metre pool runs a substantially more operating deficit," he said.

Councillor Weese also questioned the repurposing of AFLC, noting that the plan highlights an increase in Aurora's population by 2050 but will consider potentially getting rid of the ice surface, despite its popularity with winter sports.

Brown said that the report has identified that all five ice rinks are well used, however, the Aurora Family Leisure Complex Arena is the least used out of the five.

"What we're seeing provincially and what we're seeing nationally is declining participation in ice sports, and it is having a fairly dramatic impact," he said.

While the community continues to grow, part of the growth is due to an aging population, said Brown, especially those over the age 55. The younger age groups are anticipated migrate to other cities and new residents may be coming from countries where ice sports are not popular.

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland asked whether some of the current policies and strategies were looked at before suggesting recommendations for parkland policies and permit allocations.

Brown replied that they did look at current policies and that there was an identified need to bring them up to current states, in particular with allocation policies that ensure facilities are considering groups that should be prioritized.

"Most communities will prioritize not-for-profit organizations that are local first. And then when you get to the opposite end of the prioritization, it's more the commercial operators that are the least priority. It was really a matter of refinements to make sure that you are allocating an appropriate manner that maximizes the use of your facilities," he said.

An email was sent to Council members about the existence of pickleball courts that weren't being used for various reasons, said Councillor Gilliland, who asked whether these factors are being taken into consideration when forming the Master Plan.

Brown replied that when the staff obtain inventory from municipal staff, they inspect the quality of the facility, gathering information on how close the facilities are to residential areas, whether lights are needed, and more.

"So, we do take that into account. And we do recognize that, for example, school facilities tend to be less desirable. Because you know, the kids come out at recess or at lunch on a rainy day, and they're running around in the grass and putting small divots in. As a result, when a sports group comes along to play with it, the quality might not be quite as strong. We do try to recognize that some fields are less desirable than others, some have more," he said.

Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim asked how the report reconciles the many variables such as income, culture, age, and more to provide a recommendation when there may be many competing interests.

"Every decision you make with the scarce resources we have, in the short term, could be a great decision, but 5 [or] 10 years down the road could be the wrong decision. So how do you reconcile the variables that you put into the report?" he asked.

Brown replied that recommendations are looked at not only in the short term but also in the long term.

"We look at the socio demographics of the community, look at trends and best practices, we talk to as many people as we possibly can within your community and try to get as much input. We look at utilization data and participation data that is solid information so we know how many hours are being used at soccer fields, or ball diamonds and arenas and things of that nature. And really, our experience allows us to pull that all together," he said.

"We've undertaken over 400 Parks and Recreation plans. So, we have a lot of experience to bring to your community. And in fact, we've worked with your community for many years in the past as well so we do have a good strong knowledge of where you've been, and you've made great strides forward."

The complete draft master plan will be posted on the project website. Brown said they will solicit public input and feedback with a deadline of May 3. A public open house will also be held, however the date is yet to be determined.

"I would encourage all Aurorans to get out and make those comments available so that way we have a final plan that works for all of us," said Mayor Mrakas. "I know we'll get the job done. Thank you very much, Mr. Brown, thank you, Council, and I look forward to that final plan," said Mayor Tom Mrakas.

A revised plan will then be presented to Council on June 6 after input is collected from the public and other stakeholders.

By Elisa Nguyen