

Arlene VanderBeek... On Parkside Purchase

The City of Hamilton will purchase the Parkside School property from the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board. The Board followed their mandated process for the disposal of surplus property through a list of prioritized institutions, on which the City was 9th in line.

In September, City staff was directed to undertake a feasibility study of the property. The required circulation of City departments was completed. Only Public Works – Cemeteries division – expressed an identified need for the land, in keeping with a November report to the Public Works Committee which indicated that Grove Cemetery is nearing capacity and Dundas property should be acquired as soon as possible. The feasibility report was presented to Committee. The approved recommendations, which were ratified at City Council, directed staff to present an offer to purchase the property for cemetery uses.

What if Council had not agreed to purchase the property? The property would have been sold publicly, for the best price, and the City would have little control and very limited influence over the future of the site, once it was in private hands. Although any application by a private developer would be subject to the City's Zoning By-law and Official Plan regulations, we all know that developers regularly request variances or Zoning and Official Plan amendments and – even if the City denies the request – often find approval at the Provincial Ontario Municipal Board (OMB). That risk would remain unless the land is in City ownership.

Is the playfield at the north end of the Driving Park part of the sale? No. That area has long been in City ownership and will continue to be part of the Driving Park. The baseball diamonds, etc., will remain and there are no plans for hearses or cemetery headstones to be in the Driving Park.

Why not add it to the Park? City Council cannot support further investment in additional parkland in Dundas, where we already enjoy more parkland per capita than other areas of the City. Over the past decade, the City of Hamilton has invested millions of dollars in Dundas parkland: Fisher Mills Park - the field opposite Dundas District Lofts; the natural playground at Matilda and King St. West; the Rotary Creekside Parkette near AMICA; the former Veldhuis Greenhouse land along the canal; additional land for Centennial Park (to secure access and parking); and the development of the new DeLottinville Park on Newcombe Road, not to mention the cost of the new Masterplan for the Dundas Driving Park and its implementation a few years ago. As well, Council continues to invest in the Pleasantview area (along York

Road) to protect natural lands and wildlife corridors as part of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System.

What if the City purchased the land with the intent to re-sell? The disposal of surplus City lands also requires adherence to a specific process: land must be offered, publicly and openly, to the highest bidder. Groups or organizations – most with ideas for re-use of the school building or property – would have to compete with others (most likely land developers) for the highest and best price. Again, the City would have no significant control over the outcome of the sale.

As the City Councillor for the Community of Dundas, my focus is on protection of the integrity of the immediate neighbourhood, the adjoining Dundas Driving Park and the vistas of the Niagara Escarpment, balanced with the realities and consideration of the needs of our wider community.

The City's purchase to meet our need for more cemetery space gives me the most confidence for the future. It can protect not only the neighbourhood, but the Driving Park, maintain the views of the escarpment, and preserve the character of the community. It also provides for the possibility of some future complimentary residential development if the cemetery does not require the entire property.

A cemetery's park-like appearance will not detract from the beauty of the Driving Park or the escarpment. It will utilize the land where the building is located and could offer Dundas residents space for quiet reflection near the otherwise busy Park. In addition much, if not all, of the property will be retained by the City, easing concerns that future development might be intrusive or impact negatively on the neighbourhood, the park or the escarpment, and the Dundas community will avoid the possible consternation of a future challenge at the OMB over an unwanted development proposal for this site.

I understand that there are some who may not wholeheartedly agree that this is the best option. However, the majority of responses received in my office indicate to me that most residents support this as a balanced, reasonable, and considered alternative for the Parkside site and the Dundas community.

As always, I sincerely appreciate every message from the many people who take their valuable time to contact me to share their thoughts, opinions and concerns about all things in Dundas.