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Parkland preservation group pushes for a 2010 referendum on subject

By Jason Misner (*Burlington Post*)

A group trying to preserve parkland at the former General Brock school site says the city's approach to saving green space should be the subject of a referendum question in the 2010 municipal election.

The call for a referendum followed a contentious decision by city council Monday night to approve a staff-recommended bylaw that allows the city to use a fund to buy strategic land in Burlington including -- but not limited to -- at-risk greenspace or parkland. Councillors and the public have been at odds over the exact purpose of the fund.

SPIRIT OF FUND IN DISPUTE

Groups like the Save General Brock committee argued the fund, created last year during the 2007 budget talks, was intended to be used to save only green space. Group representatives, as well the public and a local environmental association urged council to ensure the fund -- which currently has \$945,000 in the bank -- be used solely to preserve green space.

However, their pleas lost with council voting 4-3 that the bylaw be flexible enough for the city to be able to buy all strategic lands at risk.

While the public gallery was warned about vocal outbursts during council deliberations, cheers went out to those who voted against applying the bylaw to all strategic lands while boos rained down on those who voted in favour.

Among those who supported the bylaw's inclusion of all strategic lands were Councillors Rick Craven, Peter Thoem, John Taylor and Carol D'Amelio. Those opposed included Mayor Cam Jackson and councillors Jack Dennison and Rick Goldring.

Amy Schnurr is communications representative of the Save General Brock Parkland committee, which formed a few years ago following fears the building and parkland at the site -- now home to Gary Allan High School -- might be sold to developers.

Schnurr told the Post after the meeting the public needs to be asked what it really wants to do to protect the environment.

"Greenspace is worthy of raising as a referendum item in the next election," she said, adding the group's goal is to protect all green space. "Once and for all, ask taxpayers how do they prioritize the environment."

A bylaw had to be created for the municipality to know how the strategic land acquisition fund would be specifically applied. That's why the fund bylaw was introduced to council back on May 26. No decision was made at the time, though, because of a procedural rule that resulted in not enough votes being cast to waive notice.

Councillor Dennison pushed for a bylaw dedicated to greenspace at council. He said that was the intent last year and it has not changed.

He said the bylaw should match the "verbiage" contained in the strategic plan that addresses preserving parkland.

"The long and short of it is the absolute intent of the fund was to be used for at-risk greenspace," Dennison said.

However, some of his colleagues adamantly disagreed.

Councillor Taylor argued the strategic plan discussed a strategy to save greenspace and that a fund

would form part of such a strategy.
"We are being perfectly consistent," he said.

The city has a \$5-million dedicated parkland reserve fund that could be used to buy greenspace, said Councillor Thoem; Brock committee members challenged the accuracy of that statement.
"We are well positioned (to buy greenspace)," he said.

But Jackson told council the city will soon run out of land for new housing, with a greater need to protect parks and open spaces. That means there will be increasing development intensification on existing lands.

"I don't believe this fund should be used because we need a sixth fire hall in the city," he said. "That's not the vision I have for the city."

The mayor also challenged City Manager Roman Martiuk on what information was used to ultimately frame the wording of the bylaw.

Martiuk responded: "Staff did the best they could to interpret what the intent is. It's council's prerogative to accept that judgment."

Before council voted, a handful of people urged politicians to create an at-risk-greenspace-only fund.

"The environment is counting on this dedicated fund," said Kurt Koster of BurlingtonGreen.

John Versluis of Walker's Line said the city has spent millions of dollars on the waterfront pier and the proposed performing arts centre, and that saving money to buy greenspace "should not be beyond council's reach."

Council's decision was not a surprise and it could have repercussions down the road, Schnurr noted. "I think the environment is going to become increasingly important," she said. "I feel bad for those councillors who are going to be on record for voting against such an important initiative. The demand for parkland is only going to increase. They missed a great opportunity."