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Artificial turf soccer fields could cost Calgary \$2.75M

Alderman wants to help fund five new pitches

Joel Kom

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A Calgary alderman wants the city to set aside \$2.75 million to build five artificial turf soccer fields -- but only if the federal and provincial governments kick in cash as well.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart will ask city council next week to throw in the cash in a bid to alleviate some of the overwhelming demand for soccer space in Calgary.

The time is right to make the move, she said, because there could be federal and provincial funding available now that might not be there later, especially because of the recent federal budget.

"I don't want to miss an opportunity to leverage funding," she said. "There's a really pressing need for our kids to get on the field to play soccer."

The \$2.75 million would make up a quarter of the cost of the five fields, and would be spent only if the other two levels of government and the Calgary Soccer Federation each make the same infusion.

The turf fields have been touted as a better long-term option than natural grass fields because they cost less to maintain, can be used much more often and last longer.

Rob Savard, chairman of the federation's expansion committee, said the investment makes sense.

"We're talking about a small sum of money for a significant benefit for a huge number of people," he said. "That doesn't occur very often."

The five fields would be built at the southeast's Calgary Soccer Centre, and would replace four grass fields at the site.

The artificial turf fields, which wouldn't need irrigation, fertilizer or pesticides, can handle more than five times as many playing hours as natural grass fields, a recent city report said.

The fields cost around \$2.5 million each to install, compared with around \$1.5 million for natural turf.

But the long-term cost savings of artificial turf are too good to ignore, Savard said.

Ald. Gord Lowe said artificial fields would also let the city compete for tournaments, something Calgary has no capacity for right now.

"It's immensely popular," Lowe said of the sport, "and if people travel here, they'll spend money here."

Ald. Bob Hawkesworth said he was behind the city pitching in for artificial turf but wanted to know whether there were other more urgent priorities the city has to address first.

"I would not want to make any spending one-offs if it means completely bypassing that priority-setting system," he said.

jkom@theherald.canwest.com

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