

No money right now for artificial soccer fields

BY KIM GUTTORMSON, CALGARY HERALD FEBRUARY 4, 2009

A pitch for city money to help install five artificial turf fields at the Calgary Soccer Centre received a sympathetic reception from aldermen Wednesday, but proponents were told there is no cash immediately available for the project.

After hearing about the merits of artificial turf over natural grass and the soccer centre proposal, the community and protective services committee agreed to evaluate funding options, as well as look at a phased-in plan for putting the turf on numerous city fields.

But aldermen were also warned the city also has a lengthy list of new recreation projects awaiting funding and existing facilities that need maintenance and upgrading.

"I'm quite optimistic we can make this happen," Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, who had asked city staff to look at the benefits of artificial turf, said of the soccer centre expansion. "It's the ultimate example of shovel-ready. It's one of those low-hanging fruits we should grab and run with."

A report to the committee outlined the advantages of artificial turf, including not needing irrigation or the application of fertilizer or pesticides. As well, an artificial field can handle about five times as many playing hours a year — about 3,000 — compared to the 550 hours a natural field is good for.

However, the fields cost about \$2.5 million to install, compared to \$1.5 million for natural turf. Renovating an existing field costs about \$2 million.

Rob Savard, chairman of the Calgary Soccer Federation's expansion committee, said they have an \$11-million plan to retro-fit the soccer centre's existing four fields with artificial turf and build a new one. It hopes the city will contribute \$5.5 million to the project, while the city's soccer associations can come up with \$2 million.

"It's the best bang for your buck," he told the committee.

Having the five high-quality fields would put Calgary in the running for at least national tournaments, something the city has been excluded from because of the state of its soccer pitches.

"It would catapult us to the number one choice in the country for tournaments," Colin Innes, president of the Calgary United Soccer Association, said. "We'd be first on the list for anyone who wants to have a tournament."

While city staff had recommended the artificial turf report be received for information, Colley-Urquhart asked that a phased-in plan for installing artificial turf fields around the city be looked at, while developing a financing model in consultation with sports groups who would use the spaces.

Ald. Bob Hawkesworth asked that the soccer centre proposal be compared to other unfunded projects on the city's books, with options for both city and external funding explored.

City staff are to report back no later than July.

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