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Ottawans pick 'urban oasis' over football for Lansdowne

Half of those polled say fixing up Frank Clair is a bad idea

Don Butler, with files from Thulasi Srikanthan

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Ottawa residents are juiced by the idea of turning Lansdowne Park into an "urban oasis." But they're decidedly unenthusiastic about maintaining Frank Clair Stadium as the home base for a new Canadian Football League franchise.

The findings come from a wide-ranging new "state of the city" survey conducted for the Citizen by the public opinion firm COMPAS Inc.

The survey, completed Aug. 21, asked 405 Ottawa residents to rate four potential options for redeveloping the park at Bank Street and the Rideau Canal.

By far the most popular, endorsed by 69 per cent, is creating an urban oasis to showcase the Rideau waterway, farmers' markets and community events. Just 19 per cent oppose the idea.

People in the old city of Ottawa are particularly keen, with three-quarters in favour and 15 per cent opposed. But even in areas added during amalgamation, 64 per cent like the idea and only 22 per cent give it thumbs down.

None of the other options garner majority support, including the idea of fixing up crumbling Frank Clair Stadium for the CFL franchise that was conditionally awarded to three area developers and Ottawa 67's owner Jeff Hunt in March.

Just 41 per cent favour fixing up Lansdowne for football, while 48 per cent think it's a bad idea. In fact, one in four gives it the lowest possible rating on a seven-point scale.

That's problematic for Mr. Hunt's group, which needs a stadium if a plan to revive CFL football is to proceed. Frank Clair Stadium's future is up in the air; the lower south-side stands, deemed structurally unsound, were demolished last month.

Mr. Hunt said the 41-per-cent support for fixing up Lansdowne for football is great news.

"Assuming that the poll is representative of the entire city, I would say it appears to be very favourable," Mr. Hunt said. "At 41 per cent of the population, that is almost 400,000 people who want to see CFL football back in Ottawa.

" If that were true, that would represent an outstanding amount of support."

Mr. Hunt also said his plans were much broader than just a football stadium.

"I don't see any constituents in your poll that will not have their needs represented in our ultimate proposal," he said. "Ultimately, I think Lansdowne park will be a lot of things to a lot of people. "

Capital Councillor Clive Doucet, whose ward includes Lansdowne, wasn't surprised by the low level of support for fixing up the stadium for football.

"Ottawa has changed a lot in the past 20 years. You go out into the suburban areas and you see people from all over the world. Most of them don't have any connection to the old football traditions of Ottawa."

However, neither Mr. Doucet nor Alta Vista Councillor Peter Hume, who chairs city council's planning committee, think that means the option of repairing the stadium is off the table.

"I hope we don't make any precipitous decisions," said Mr. Doucet, who pointed out that the stadium is a \$50-million asset for which the city has no replacement. "I think we need to think very carefully about what, if anything, we want to do about it."

Mr. Hume said he's always maintained that the city needs a multi-purpose stadium roughly the size of Frank Clair. "Every major municipality across North America has these to host a variety of events."

The question is whether Lansdowne Park is the right location for it, he said.

The survey contains more bad news for the Ottawa businessmen promoting CFL football. The option of creating a combination of multi-unit housing, restaurants and entertainment at Lansdowne fared poorest among the four choices, with just 33-per-cent support. More than half -- 54 per cent -- oppose it.

Last year, Mr. Hunt's group gave the city an unsolicited proposal for a private, mixed residential and commercial redevelopment of the 40-acre park. More recently, it has proposed that fixing the stadium could be part of a wider redevelopment.

The Citizen poll may help torpedo the idea of housing at Lansdowne once and for all, Mr. Hume suggested.

The proposal was never very popular, he said, and the die was probably cast when city council decided to hold an international design competition after kicking around redevelopment ideas for Lansdowne Park for more than 15 years.

"When council said 'we want to do a design competition,' it certainly didn't list housing as one of the top things it wanted to see," Mr. Hume said. "This is just another piece of verification that that wasn't a popular choice."

However, the design competition is on hold while the city reviews the CFL group's business plan and tries to determine whether the stadium and associated Civic Centre are worth fixing.

Mr. Doucet called the survey results "very good news."

"This is what I've been saying for 10 years," he said. "We all know that whole area would be just fabulously improved if there was more than just a thin strip of grass next to the canal. This is the first time that sort of gut instinct has been confirmed. It's terrifically exciting."

Mr. Doucet said the findings prove support for a "green community urban oasis" at Lansdowne is citywide, and not limited to people who live near the park. "I think the rest of council is going to have to pay attention."

Mr. Hume agreed the survey "provides some valuable insight into how the public views

the park."

But he pointed out that the "urban oasis" option is the least defined of the four because it's not clear what's meant by "community events."

"It's always easy to say, 'I like that one,' when it's less defined. The question will be, how do you do that?"

Bob Brocklebank, president of the Glebe Community Association, said he doesn't necessarily see a tremendous conflict between trying to accommodate many different uses on such a large site.

He said he thought it was interesting that a proposal that involves multiple uses got the most support.

"I think this goes back to a statement that we have made on a number of occasions. We like it to be a welcoming place, where people with differing interests will come and enjoy their city.

"We feel it's a city asset and should be a city asset to everybody," Mr. Brocklebank said.

The COMPAS survey is deemed accurate to within 4.9 percentage points, plus or minus, 19 times in 20.

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What the Survey Asked

Question: There's been some talk about redeveloping Lansdowne Park. Using a seven-point scale where 7 means "strongly support" and 1 the opposite, to what extent do you support each of the following possibilities for the redevelopment?

Creating an urban oasis to showcase the waterway, farmers' markets and community events

Percentage saying 5 or higher: 69

Percentage saying 3 or less: 19

Creating a centre for arts and entertainment

Percentage saying 5 or higher: 46

Percentage saying 3 or less: 39

Maintaining Frank Clair Stadium for a new CFL franchise

Percentage saying 5 or higher: 41

Percentage saying 3 or less: 48

Creating a combination of multi-unit housing, restaurants and entertainment

Percentage saying 5 or higher: 33

Percentage saying 3 or less: 54

Another question in the survey confirms Ottawa is first and foremost a hockey town.

- 84 per cent say the Ottawa Senators are important to the community
- 77 per cent say the same of the Ottawa 67's
- 44 per cent say a new CFL team would be important
- 37 per cent say the Ottawa Fury soccer franchise is important
- 33 per cent say the Ottawa Rapidz baseball team is important

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