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Council asks for details on soccer arena plan 'A million questions' still to be answered before any position can be formed

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Ottawa city councillors are excited about the prospect of a professional soccer stadium in Kanata, but they want to see Eugene Melnyk's detailed plan before taking a position on the project.

Mr. Melnyk is eyeing 12 hectares of city-owned land in Kanata West, southeast of his Scotiabank Place arena, as the location for a 30,000-seat stadium. But there are a lot of questions about the project: how it's affected by the floodplain of the nearby Carp River, what the city would get in exchange for the land, and what the implications might be for other sports properties.

City officials say they haven't seen a scrap of written information on the proposal.

"There are a million questions. Put it all on paper and tell us what you expect," said Alta Vista Councillor Peter Hume, who is chairman of the planning and environment committee.

"People are excited about it. It's a great debate to have. It's about city building. But right now, we're debating a press conference."

On Tuesday, Mr. Melnyk went public with his idea to build a soccer stadium and five practice soccer fields, to be located on Palladium Drive north of Maple Grove Road. The concept is to create a sports-entertainment hub with a main street along Palladium Drive connecting the NHL hockey arena to the soccer venue.

The City of Ottawa owns 25 hectares in the area, including 6.5 hectares at a works yard on Maple Grove Road that was recently upgraded, six hectares meant to be used for stormwater management ponds, about half a hectare for public transit and 12 hectares to be sold for development. Part of the city land is used as a temporary snow dump.

The 12 hectares intended for development have been expected to bring in \$7.5 million for the city, which could be used to pay for a permanent snow dump elsewhere, as well as some of the works yard costs.

The suggestion this week, however, is that the city's contribution to a Major League Soccer franchise would be the 30-hectare site.

Councillors said they are happy to see the project, but not especially keen to give their land away.

River Councillor Maria McRae said she has "an open mind," but believes such giveaways will lead to other organizations coming forward and asking for city land. She said the city has its own stadium in Lansdowne Park and it might not make

sense to be handing out millions of dollars' worth of land when its own asset needs refurbishment.

Councillor Rainer Bloess, an occasional soccer player, said the city has been chastened by recent experiences with sports facilities such as the Ray Friel Centre and the Sensplex, where the city had to step in to keep the facilities afloat financially after deals with private partners went sour. He said the city has to also keep in mind its obligations to keep Lansdowne Park and its Coventry Road baseball stadium going.

"Council is more cautious these days on any of these outside things," said Mr. Bloess.

OTTAWA-Kanata North Councillor Marianne Wilkinson said the stadium proposal is "great," well sited on reasonably flat land, but that building a stadium would apply more pressure on the city to supply more public transit to the site more quickly. She said that if the city kicks in its 30 acres, it must get something back, such as some long-term use of the soccer fields and perhaps of the stadium itself.

Bay Councillor Alex Cullen said he doesn't want to be handing land over to a private business. He said the city has recently given land to Algonquin College and La Cité Collégiale for expansions, but he said Mr. Melnyk's company is not in the same public category.

"We're not in the business of subsidizing private, for-profit ventures," said Mr. Cullen.

Councillor Shad Qadri, who represents Kanata West, knew nothing of the project until he was called by a reporter on Tuesday. He wants to hear all details before taking a position.

Mr. Qadri said such a project would be a tremendous economic development instrument for the Kanata area and great for soccer players because "we're crying for soccer fields." But he said there is a development freeze in Kanata West, the 725-hectare commercial and residential development project around Scotiabank Place.

The city has hired a consultant to do a third-party review of the approvals process for Kanata West after errors were found in floodplain modelling for the area and questions were raised by city auditor general Alain Lalonde about the propriety of the approvals process. The review is expected by the end of the year.

Ontario Environment Minister John Gerretsen was sufficiently perturbed about Kanata West to send a strongly worded letter to the city this summer setting out extra planning and engineering work he wants done before building happens. The development approvals process has already dragged on for seven years.

One of the key environmental issues is the handling of stormwater. Specifically on the city's land, the June 2006 master servicing study for Kanata West shows a stormwater pond on the same land that is being proposed for two of the practice soccer fields. The stormwater facility on the city's land is supposed to drain 239 hectares, about one-third of the whole Kanata West development.

While the city is preparing to get a proposal from Mr. Melnyk's group, it is also awaiting a proposal from another development group, a partnership of businessmen who want to bring a Canadian Football League franchise to Ottawa and redevelop Lansdowne Park in the process. One of the businessmen, Minto Developments president Roger Greenberg, said yesterday that the group is working on its plans "vigorously" and they should be ready within about two weeks.

The city confirmed yesterday that it is assessing the structures at Lansdowne Park in preparation for discussions about the park's future. Steve Finnermore, executive director of business services with the city, said he believes the Civic Centre and north side stands for Frank Clair Stadium are "in pretty good shape," but the city wants to ensure there are no big surprises as it considers Lansdowne's future. That report is expected in late September or early October.

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