

Burlington Post—May 28, 2008:

Councillors, residents at odds over purpose of \$945-K municipal fund

City councillors and a local group trying to preserve parkland at the site of the former General Brock school are at odds over the purpose of a municipal fund established to acquire strategic lands in Burlington.

Some say the fund -- approved last year, which currently has a balance of \$945,000 -- is supposed to be used to acquire all strategic lands at risk in Burlington. Others insist the purpose is specifically to save at-risk green space or parkland.

The polar opposite viewpoints came to a head at a city council meeting last week during debate of a staff-recommended bylaw that would determine "the accumulation of funds for the purpose of acquiring strategic lands".

Councillor Jack Dennison -- whose ward includes General Brock lands -- wanted the bylaw to specifically reference the goal of "securing access and protection of parkland and open space."

His motion lost.

Dennison disputed staff's position the General Brock committee was notified about the bylaw.

Councillor John Taylor disagreed with Dennison's motion, saying it is an outright change to the point of the fund.

The fund was to "finance the acquisition of strategic land" and that "it did not say all the stuff Councillor Dennison added. Councillor Dennison's amendment is a change," Taylor said.

In a later interview, City Clerk Kim Phillips said, while there seems to be a "variety of opinions", she understood the fund's purpose was to include the purchase of any strategic land at risk.

That said, a bylaw has to be created for the municipality to know how the fund would be specifically applied, she said. That's why the strategic land acquisition fund bylaw was before council last week.

At the meeting, Dennison requested that the strategic land fund bylaw be subject for a separate vote on a motion to waive notice. His request was granted by Mayor Cam Jackson. Requiring a two-thirds majority vote -- in Burlington council's case, five of seven votes -- the motion to waive notice determines if public comment will be permitted to further debate an issue.

Since the motion to waive notice lost, the bylaw could not be passed and would come back to the next city council meeting on Monday, June 9 for more public debate. At that meeting, delegates will have an opportunity to speak to the issue for no longer than five minutes each.

Dennison repeated after the meeting that he believes the land-buying fund was to be used for greenspace purchases.

"...when we passed it back at budget in 2007, it was clearly for at-risk strategic land -- greenspace, parkland. All the discussion was at-risk green space."

When asked why there is confusion about the fund's intent, he said he didn't know.

Mayor Jackson agreed that the fund's purpose to protect greenspace is contained in the city's current strategic plan.

According to a May 7 staff report examining the fund bylaw, a goal of the strategic plan, under Managed Growth, Initiative 3.1 b, is to "develop a strategic land acquisition strategy..."

"The establishment of this reserve fund allows senior staff to move forward on the strategic goal to manage growth and move forward with Burlington's strategic plan..." wrote Treasurer Steve Zorbas.

Members of the Save General Brock Committee say they are upset with politicians who say the acquisition fund is for saving all lands at risk of development.

The committee, a citizen's advisory panel to city council, was set up to address residents' fear that park lands might be sold to developers when the original General Brock high school was closed four years ago. During last year's budget approval process, the committee was vocal about creating a fund that would help preserve green space.

The Halton District School Board owns the 10.4-hectare (26-acre) former General Brock property, which is estimated to be worth \$11 million. No public decision has been made about its future, according to senior city staff.

General Brock Park committee chair Ken Woodruff and the group's communications representative, Amy Schnurr, say the fund's purpose was to protect at-risk green space. They expressed concern money could be used to buy buildings and then there will be no cash in the fund when at-risk parkland becomes available.

"We think the fund should have been to preserve greenspace; it certainly was the original intent," Woodruff said, adding the committee voiced its concerns to the city over the wording of the bylaw. "Greenspace is at risk in Burlington."

Added Schnurr, "For the average citizen, they would be considered misled. We're no further ahead."

But Councillor Rick Craven told the Post the fund can include greenspace but should not be limited solely to its purchase. He said some politicians made the preservation of greenspace an election issue in the 2006 campaign and are using the bylaw for politics.

"Nobody is fooling anybody. We all know and appreciate that some of the candidates in the last election made promises to the folks representing the General Brock lands. I can't help the fact they made those political promises," he said. "We have to look out for the best interests of the entire city."

In the News....

*Save General Brock Park Committee submits response to **May 28** Post article(further below):
(not published)*

Dear Editor & Mr. Misner,

Thank you for your coverage of the important issue of parkland preservation and the city's strategic land acquisition fund. However, we believe your readers would like to know more of the complete facts in regards to the fund in question.

For more than four years now, when Council and staff have been asked what strategies and funds are in place to protect parklands , the response has generally been, " sorry, we just don't have the funds in the budget". And yet, somehow, our innovative leaders and staff are able to allocate tax dollars to support a number of development initiatives in the city – the Performing Arts Centre, Waterfront Pier, potentially McMaster U. to name a few.

Our Committee has heard loud and clear from citizens throughout Burlington that the environment and green spaces are very important and therefore we believe there should be a plan in place to ensure parklands are protected for current and future generations to enjoy. As the city approaches buildout and our population climbs, we believe it is more important than ever before to ensure there are budgeted dollars to acquire any parklands that are at risk to be sold to developers.

We were therefore pleased when the majority of this Council previously voted in support of a strategic land acquisition fund to protect at risk green space. And, while The Post referenced the first few words of the Strategic Plan, we believe it is very important that readers be given the opportunity to read it in full. It states: "Develop a strategic land acquisition strategy that addresses at risk or environmentally sensitive green space and other opportunities for securing access to and protection of parkland and open space" .

Now, the majority of Council have voted in support of a bylaw (to support the fund) that includes no mention of at risk green space at all. They argue that while the funds can still be used for at risk parkland, they want it to be "flexible" to allow them to use the fund for any lands that they may deem to be strategic. Why does the fund have to now be used to compete with potential development initiatives?

We believe environmental protection is worthy of a dedicated fund. The fund is NOT just for places like General Brock but for any and all parkland that may become at risk throughout the city. Hopefully our Councillors will show the community on June 9th that they are truly committed to protecting our valued green spaces, by voting in support of a bylaw solely for parkland preservation.