

# Amazingly, silence greeted the natural grass pledge

**T**he expected announcement was received with a significant silence. "No decision has been made," said Mayor Karin Marks early in Monday's evening's council meeting. Then she added: "We are looking at all natural turf options."

Did that mean the file is closed on the artificial turf? Of course it is, but the reluctance to say so explicitly was amazing.

Councillors approached after the meeting were reluctant to clarify the situation. It was as though there were a blood pact of secrecy! Like the Sopranos, lips were zipped tight.

Why such secrecy?

Next day, the mayor reiterated to me that a natural grass solution was being sought. "[Director-General] Bruce St. Louis and his staff are looking at all the issues that would follow on from that position.

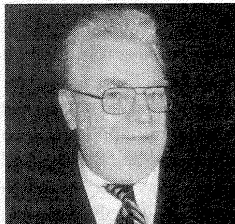
"People have told us overwhelmingly that they do not want artificial turf. It is not the direction we want to go, but we are also committed to expanding the recreation programme.

"We want to know all that would be involved in staying with natural turf — not just what type of grass, but the layout of the fields, comparative costs, scheduling, usage and, in fact, every detail.

"Hopefully, they will find a solution that works. Only then will we make a decision."

## Stop the suspicions

That response should be clear for most people. But Council has allowed suspicions to



## Civic Alert

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surround the artificial turf project.

It has met very skilled resistance from the Save the Park group, led by Patrick Barnard, which has capitalized on every City Hall flaw.

They are orientated around NIMBY — Not in My Backyard, or in this case, peoples' front yards.

There is nothing wrong with NIMBY; after all, that is what the whole community did when fighting the forced mergers. Everyone is entitled to protect their investments.

But the Save the Park group has exploited City Hall's resistance to being fully open on the project. That is one of the reasons why a clearer statement now of the adoption of the natural turf option would have helped.

Over the past months, the group has made unconventional requests for information and were unhappy when rebuffed.

Mavis Young of Melville Ave., standing in for the vacationing Barnard, this week gave a guarded welcome to the mayor's statement.

"While pleased that the city is prepared to look at natural turf options, we would like more details. For example, if they are only

going to consult the people who are pushing artificial turf, that is not reassuring," she said.

## Grass experts

"There are many experts in this area who are knowledgeable about new hardy strains of grass and the proper care of fields. The names of those being consulted should be publicly available."

Young asked that consideration is given to the suggestions of WMA president Henry Olders, who has proposed looking at the real needs of the sports programs and at other options for sites.

I believe Council has asked for these aspect to be included.

She also asked that a time frame is put on the project, and would like to receive some feedback on the feelings of councillors.

"Practically everyone in town seems to have considered this issue and formed an opinion, except our elected representatives," she said.

I agree with her. The time has come when members should explain their personal approach, as Patrick Martin did two weeks ago. It would help overcome the false aura that has enveloped the project.

## Committee writes

Citizens continue to be concerned over the issue. The Environment Committee of the Healthy City Project wrote to Mayor Marks

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and Council informing them that it could not support the artificial turf option.

"It was difficult for us because we know of the need for recreational facilities," said Jennifer Patton, the committee chairperson.

At an even more down-to-earth-level, I heard this week from two regular Soccer dads. With the season almost over, they independently pointed out the "relatively" good condition of the grass and the playing surface.

By the way, a lot of soccer is played on land around the world that is far more testing than that of Westmount Park. See some of it on YouTube at <http://tinyurl.com/29jyte>.

## Back from the West

Mayor Marks returned from her West Coast trip at the weekend full of ideas and inspiration for the sustainable community she wants to sponsor in Westmount.

She attended the annual meeting of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities in Calgary, and then a Livable Communities Conference in Portland, Oregon. There, she met many other mayors and elected officials collecting ideas that would be helpful here.

"I never thought I would be as interested in garbage as I have become," she quipped at Monday night's council meeting when reporting some of the highlights of her trip.

"For instance, I saw several exhibits of

waste processing methods that confirm my feeling that they will become small enough and cheap enough to consider accepting responsibility for our own garbage.

"We are not there yet, but given how the costs of innovations drop, we will be able to use them one day."

## Solar future

Marks was also impressed with solar panelled parking metres and traffic lights. "They are much cheaper because it saves a lot of wiring," she told Council.

In Portland, she met local officials of both the centre city and the elected regional council. "There are 25 municipalities working together, overcoming jurisdictional problems, but building a successful community," Marks reported.

She was very impressed with Portland's streetcar network — "a wonderful way to move lots of people across a city." It is free for use in the downtown core, but an adverse effect may have been to reward homelessness. "It shows how much care is needed when making these kinds of decisions," Marks told me.

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