

# Sutherland: School board deserved a more respectful response from mayor

What they got amounted to a suggested change in their athletic

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Columnist Sylvia Sutherland.

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By **Sylvia Sutherland**

Kevin MacKenzie, chair of the PVNC Catholic District School Board, deserved a better response than the one he got from mayor Jeff Leal. He and the students he represents deserved at the very least some respectful acknowledgment to their concerns regarding the proposed redevelopment of Bonnerworth Park.

But they got none.

Instead, they got what amounted to a suggested change in their athletic program — from soccer, baseball and other field sports to pickleball.

The last time I checked, among a mayor's responsibilities is not athletic director for a local school board. But perhaps that came with the "strong mayor" powers so graciously bestowed on certain mayors by premier Doug Ford.

However arrived at, Leal seems to have assumed it.

Instead of addressing the Catholic school board's concerns regarding lack of any meaningful consultation over the city's plan to pave over much of Bonnerworth and install 16 pickleball courts in a public park that has been used for generations by its students and others, it instead got the following from the mayor:

"I want to acknowledge your letter of June 27, 2024, regarding the redevelopment of Bonnerworth Park. The City of Peterborough values your view and incites (sic) on these matters."

Leal continues, "The City of Peterborough is aware that the teachers for your board, when the redevelopment is completed, will take students to Bonnerworth to learn and participate in the sport of pickleball."

It is unclear how he knows teachers will do this. Perhaps as the board's athletic director he will order them to do so.

As an alternative to Bonnerworth, he generously offers up space at Queen Mary, St. Theresa's and Westmount elementary schools — which is probably unwelcome news to them since they need the space for their own activities.

Then, suggests the mayor, there is nearby Hamilton Park (a children's water park) and Jackson Park (ideal for field sports if you ignore the walking trails, stream and trees.)

The mayor maintains that "We are all aware of the value of green space in a world of climate change," while stubbornly refusing to consider the fact that paving over green space for pickleball courts, rather runs counter to that statement.

This did not begin as a war against pickleball or those who play it. To the contrary, most of those opposed to the Bonnerworth proposal, probably including most of the 8,000 people who have since signed a petition against it, thought the sport fine. It was the location they were objecting to. Surely there are other places for the courts. Several have been suggested.

Perhaps, given the challenges of playing pickleball outdoors in the increasingly stifling heat of Canadian summers or in the snows of Canadian winters, some place indoors? Some place where its penetrating noise will not disturb seniors living across the road or families living in neighbouring housing.

As the debate has continued though, it has picked up in intensity. Now, perhaps inspired by the mayor's comments at council that the anti-Bonnerworth contingent consider pickleball players "hoity toity," it is beginning to take on the characteristics of tribal warfare.

It didn't begin that way. No one initially said anything about the individual attributes, or lack thereof, of either pickleball players or Bonnerworth defenders. Now, they are beginning to call each other names. Which is a pity.

Surely one of the challenges of any mayor and council is, as best they can, to bring their community together — not foster its division.

Why, then, this insistence on Bonnerworth?



**Sylvia Sutherland** was Peterborough's mayor from 1985 to 1991 and from 1997 to 2006.

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