

Town loans cash to HHGC to prevent its closure

By **CYNTHIA GAMBLE**
Staff Writer

A perfect storm of events in the last couple of months has led an once prosperous non-profit group—the Halton Hills Gymnastics Club (HHGC)—to the verge of closing its doors.

But the Town of Halton Hills has provided an umbrella—\$324,000 in loans over the next three years, with \$124,310 of that to be paid immediately to creditors.

The loan was approved by the majority of council at a special council meeting on Monday.

“I think that the proposed service agreement between Halton Hills Gymnastics Club and the Town of Halton Hills, first of all, is obviously necessary. The club got into a financial problem that they had no control over,” said Ward 1 Councillor Michael O’Leary, who moved the recommendation. “We certainly have an obligation as a council to support amateur sport and through this recommendation we are proving once again the Town of Halton Hills does support amateur sport throughout the whole municipality.”

In a statement to *The Independent & Free Press*, HHGC said, “We are thrilled with the town’s support.

We are a non-profit club that due to some circumstances out of our control, fell into financial difficulty. This support allows us to continue offering our broad range

of gymnastics services in our community. We are the only facility in Georgetown that offers such a diverse breadth of recreation and competitive programs for age groups: toddlers to adults. We are a fully equipped 14,900-square-foot facility dedicated to gymnastics, tumbling and trampoline programs.”

“Without immediate financial assistance we would be forced to cease operations,” Damian Brooks, HHGC director of risk management told council Monday. “If that were to occur there would be no alternative gymnastics service for pre-teens, teens and adults within Halton Hills and greatly reduced capacity for our youngest demographic.”

He reminded that majority of its participants are girls.

The proposed service contract is a viable option that would sustain HHGC operations and the repayment plan is feasible given the club’s track record and strong business plan, said Brooks. He expects that the club will recover in two to four years.

The troubles began for HHGC, a 35-year organization in the town, when it encountered new competition (which serves only the younger ages) and ongoing dissatisfaction from patrons on its minimal parking at

its 36 Armstrong Ave. location.

The building’s parking lot has only 14 spots designated for HHGC, which serves about 1,100 different participants annually. The final blow came in April when an interior non-structural wall collapsed into the centre, crushing a set of high/uneven bars, mats and ruining the foam pits. Repairs have since been made and both Town inspectors and an independent engineer have given the facility a green light,” said HHGC spokesperson Jo-Anne O’Quinn.

But the impact was more ongoing. It closed the club for three weeks, while the volunteer board of directors scrambled to find temporary accommodations. Competitive gymnastics were able to borrow training space in Milton and Mississauga, and in May, HHGC rented space in two Acton facilities—the Acton Curling Club and the leisure pad at the Acton Arena.

But many recreational gymnasts dropped out as they were not interested in driving to Acton to attend classes, said O’Quinn. As well, rental income from the yoga studio and the cheerleading group renting the HHGC space was lost.

Then due to the uncertainty of the premises HHGC was unable to advertise its summer camps and consequently lost a “considerable amount of revenue,” said O’Quinn.

However, she said the club is confident its traditional 500-plus participant level will be reached for the fall programs.

O’Quinn said the club had a significant setback with the parking with the construction of a 100-yard seven foot high chain link/barbed wire fence that restricted 80 per cent of the parking during peak times. She said the club is working with the landlord to free up an additional 20 spots to resolve the parking congestion; in the meantime, parents are carpooling.

The landlord of 36 Armstrong, David McNally, called the interior wall collapse minor, that could have been fixed in a week, but through parents’ worry, and then subsequent involvement of the Town building inspectors and engineers, it took longer than expected, he said.

McNally said he was told the collapse was not a result of poor construction, but the result of a wind storm that through an open doorway in the adjoining unit pressurized the building.

He has taken full financial responsibility, not only replacing the wall, but upgrading the rest of the building walls to current code standards. McNally added that he did not charge the club any base rent for the months of June, July and August and plans to reduce their future rent to levels charged 20 years ago until they get past their current problems. “I feel bad for them,” he said.

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