

Council freezes ice rates for youth groups

'Lack of trust between town, arena users'

BY HANNELORE VOLPE
Staff Writer

Keeping more than 1,000 local skaters and hockey players in sports they love was behind impassioned pleas made to Whitchurch-Stouffville council Tuesday.

Ice rental rates at the arena should be frozen or reduced, Joe Cornacchia, president of the Whitchurch-Stouffville Minor Hockey Association and Lesley English, treasurer of the Whitchurch-Stouffville Figure Skating Club, emphasized.

They got their wish, sort of.

Council decided to not increase ice rates until user fee policies have been estab-

lished for the major sports groups in the municipality. User fees for the facilities are to be set with participation by representatives of ice user and other groups. A date has not yet been set.

"We always try to work together with the user groups," said Tom Graham, director of leisure services.

Ice rental rates were to increase by close to 6 per cent for 2004, bringing hourly rates to \$150.

The hockey association had been lobbying for lower rates for the past three years. A debenture to pay off the second ice pad built at the Stouffville Arena about eight years ago was forgiven by the town, which means user groups shouldn't have to pay back \$80,000 each year to defray the cost, Mr. Cornacchia maintains.

He referred to an agreement made at the time

between user groups and the town. It was nowhere to be found, Councillor Ken Ferdinands said. "These documents simply don't exist."

Mr. Cornacchia was under the impression the arena showed a profit each year.

Not so, said treasurer-administrator Nick Kristoffy.

"We lose a lot of money," the treasurer said. "It is heavily subsidized, as are 99 per cent of municipal arenas across the province."

Many other arenas are charging hourly ice rental fees of around \$200 per hour, he said.

With rising hydro rates, cost pressures on the arena are increasing. Hydro rates jumped from \$90,000 to \$138,000 over the past year.

Capital reserves for the arena have to be increased drastically, Mr. Graham, to maintain the building effec-

tively and replace equipment and machinery when required.

For 2004, \$40,000 has been placed in the capital reserve for the arena. That's up from \$20,000 in previous years.

'Our national game is becoming cost-prohibitive.'

But, Mr. Graham emphasized, "to maintain what we own, a minimum of \$100,000 in capital reserves should be put aside for the arena every year."

Mr. Cornacchia wants to see a user rate policy in place that is fair to all user groups, he said in an interview after the meeting. He's worried that if ice fees increase, registration fees will have to go up

accordingly. Although the WSMHA has managed its financial affairs so well it is offering a \$30 registration fee rebate to all players in the 2003-04 season and a \$25 reduction in fees for 2004-05, Mr. Cornacchia fears increasing ice rates will deliver a blow to hockey that will be felt for years to come.

"User groups for all the facilities have to be treated the same," Mr. Cornacchia said.

"Our national game is becoming cost-prohibitive." The WSMHA has around 800 players.

The Markham-Stouffville Girls Hockey Association has approximately 425 players and adult hockey players number over 300.

Lesley English, whose family skates and plays hockey, spends about \$4,000 each year on ice-related sports.

"I don't want any of these

sports to get driven out of existence," Ann Scott, president of the Whitchurch-Stouffville Figure Skating Club, said in an interview.

To hold registration fees steady for its more than 300 members, the skating club reduced its season by three weeks last year and by another two weeks this year.

The originally proposed rate increase plus no rebate of \$15 per hour of ice time adds up to more than \$7,000 in extra yearly expenses for the skating club, Ms. English, a chartered accountant, said.

Mr. Ferdinands said a lack of trust has developed between the parties and it has to be rectified.

Mayor Sue Sherban said this issue is something that she wants to resolve once and for all for the town and associations.

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