



Newmarket's Don McKnight (right) president of the Ontario Baseball Association and Dirk Drieberg, with Vaughan Baseball are upset municipalities continue to increase user fees for recreation groups.

STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Rising fees pricing some families out of competitive sports

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

A teenage boy decked out in a baseball uniform steps up to the plate, waits for a pitch and swings for the fences.

Except, just as the bat connects with the ball, the scene changes to the same youth using a club to smash a car window.

The powerful message of the United Way television commercial is clear — get kids off the street with positive activities and they'll make you proud.

Leave them idle and who knows the trouble they'll get up to.

It's a message in which York Region recreation associations believe strongly.

But those organizations are crying foul, complaining increasing user fees to rent municipally-owned baseball diamonds, hockey rinks and soccer pitches are making it unaffordable for many families to enrol their children in organized sports.

"Do you want a child tax? Sports are part and parcel of keeping kids off the streets. To me everybody benefits," said Dirk Drieberg, vice-president of the Vaughan Baseball Association and board member of Baseball Ontario.

He is upset Vaughan adopted a new policy last week hiking user fees with little warning or consultation with teams.

"There's only so much we can go back and say to parents 'If you want your kid to play a sport, you have to keep anteing up'."

Politicians sympathize but say there's not much they can do about it.

Vaughan and other municipalities already subsidize fees they charge organized sports teams, Mayor Michael Di Biase said.

At the same time, municipalities, which must balance their budgets by law, are facing increasing costs for labour, utilities and pooling expenses, the controversial fees municipalities in York, Durham, Halton and Peel regions must contribute to pay Toronto's social costs.

It's only logical to pass a portion of those costs on to teams, Mr. Di Biase said.

"If I had the \$30 million (in pooling money) we sent to Toronto... I would allow as much as possible, especially for youth, free access to pools, free skating and subsidize various sports organizations. I would be the most popular person in town," he said.

But with municipalities left with only two options to raise funds — general tax levy and user fees, the mayor said options are limited.

"The taxpayer is already burdened with a large amount. I think it needs to be a fine balance and that's what we're trying to achieve."

Mr. Drieberg, Don McK-

night, David Corraza and Stan Pagonis have been coaching and organizing children and youth sports teams for years.

They recognize why municipalities charge teams user fees, which teams pass on to participants.

But they insist those fees are getting out of hand.

"We see the loss of a lot of children (from teams) every year," said Mr. McKnight, treasurer of Newmarket Baseball and president of Ontario Baseball associations.

"I certainly think, in some cases, it may be the fees. Some people, if they're going to cut back on something, that would be the first thing to go."

While many teams and municipalities offer registration subsidies for disadvantaged children, some families are uncomfortable admitting they can't afford the fees.

He's doubtful the incoming Conservatives promise to offer tax credits to families who enroll their children in sports will help, arguing it will be a headache to administer.

Mr. Pagonis, president of Richmond Hill Baseball, said user fees used to make up a sliver of municipal budgets. Today, he said they often account for a third or more.

He wants councillors to look at the bigger picture, arguing it is in society's best interests to keep children physically active and involved in positive activities.

Domenic Taccone, a 12-year-old Newmarket boy who plays on a house league hockey team and house league and select soccer teams, believes it's important for youngsters to play organized sports.

"I like playing sports because on a team you get to play with some of your friends and meet new people," he said, adding he also enjoys just hanging out with his friends playing street hockey or skateboarding.

Even at his age, Domenic realizes the financial cost to his parents to enrol him in sports.

"For hockey, I always wanted to be a goalie but the pads (are costly)," he said, adding this is on top of the \$300 or \$400 registration fee.

"I understand my parents don't have that kind of money so I'm happy where I am now (playing forward)."

At a budget meeting last week, Mr. Drieberg and Mr. Corraza, general manager of the Vaughan Panthers hockey club, complained about the city's new user fee policy.

The benefits of children's organized sports justify using tax revenues to prevent user fees becoming unaffordable, Mr. Corraza said.

"If somebody asks you, 'Do you want to use general taxes to keep kids out of the malls, out of the parks (loitering)' my answer is 'Definitely.' Are we here to support our youth or do you want to make it a numbers game?"



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