



Falmouth hockey rink proposal gets lukewarm reception from existing arena

By Ben McCanna | March 19, 2014

A \$1.3 million plan to add a new ice hockey rink on Hat Trick Drive is gaining momentum, but the effort has also generated increased scrutiny from operators of the town's existing skating rink.

On March 13, the board of directors of Falmouth Family Ice sent a letter to the town seeking eight provisions that would limit direct competition from Casco Bay Hockey Association, the group that hopes to build a new, open-air, pavilion-style rink to replace a flagging, town-owned outdoor rink at Village Park.

Family Ice and Casco Bay Hockey Association are both nonprofits. Casco Bay Hockey is a Portland-based youth hockey organization with more than 800 players and 150 volunteer coaches.

If the hockey association is successful, both rinks would be on town-owned land with long-term lease agreements.

Family Ice board member Bill Welch on Tuesday said his group's reaction to the proposal for a new, neighboring rink is largely positive, but they would like to see the town include several proposed provisions in any lease agreement for the new facility.

Welch, a commercial real estate lawyer, said the response is analogous to a mall owner who wouldn't put competing businesses in close proximity.

"Circuit City and Best Buy can't be in the same shopping center," Welch said. "Or, if they are, one's going to sell TVs and the other is going to sell computers. ... We're suggesting the town should operate like a commercial landlord, with two valuable tenants who can create value for each other, as long as they're not in competition with each other."

The four-page letter, which was also sent to the hockey association, asks for provisions to ensure compatibility between the two entities. Many of the provisions are already part of the association's plan, including that the new rink be a seasonal, open-air facility and be hockey-focused.

Other provisions call for prohibitions on "traditional public skating sessions," skate rentals, figure skating, skate sharpening services, and ice rentals for adult hockey programs.

"It's our position that if all these things can be properly addressed, the rinks will be great together and will create some synergy," Welch said.

John Veilleux, president of the Casco Bay Hockey Association, said the two groups are largely in agreement.

"None of these appear to be deal breakers, but there are some things we are going to push on," he said, including the proposed limits on skate sharpening services and adult hockey programs.

Veilleux and volunteer coach Tom Marjerison on Tuesday said their project would benefit the town because it will revitalize an area that is blighted by the unmaintained outdoor rink. Falmouth schools will be able to use the facility during the off season for rainy-day sports practices, they added, and the rink could host the town's annual Christmas tree-lighting ceremony, which is traditionally held at the same location.

Marjerison said some of Family Ice's concerns are shortsighted, particularly the proposed prohibition on skate sharpening.

"The bottom line is this rink is really going to help Family Ice, because they're going to get more (ice) rentals in the off season as we grow Casco Bay Hockey. We'll be able to hold tournaments here because there will be two rinks," he said. "Ultimately, this rink is going to be built. It's just a matter of where. This is the right spot ... but if it doesn't go here, it's going to go somewhere else, and I don't think anybody wants that."

On March 10, Veilleux presented an update on the project to the Town Council that included design renderings from Port City Architecture. He said the rink will be slightly larger than the one it will replace, but the surrounding trees will remain.

A modular-style warming hut would be demolished to make room for the new rink's "aesthetically pleasing" facade, which will include four locker rooms, two restrooms and a viewing area for parents.

The rest of the facility would be open to the elements, with the exception of a pavilion-style roof. The ice would be kept cool on warmer days by a compressor, which the association has already purchased.

The association has also started testing soil, engineering designs and pursuing zoning approval. Additional updates on the project, including conceptual drawings, are available at cascobayarena.com.

Town Manager Nathan Poore said he has asked the association and Family Ice to "mutually resolve remaining issues prior to Town Council consideration of a lease agreement."

"In the event that they cannot resolve all the issues, both parties are more than welcome to share their concerns with the council," Poore said. "Until then, it's too early to speculate a position of the town or the Town Council."

Veilleux said he would soon send a formal letter in response to Family Ice's proposed provisions.

Welch said any reduction in revenue for Family Ice could hurt its community programs like Opportunity Skate, which provides free ice time to people with disabilities.

"We scrap for every dollar," Welch said.

Nonetheless, Welch acknowledged that creating provisions in any lease agreement between the town and Casco Bay Hockey Association is out of Family Ice's hands.

"This is what we'd like to see happen, but we know we don't have any veto power, or anything along those lines," Welch said.

The hockey association first pitched its plan to the Town Council in late January. So far, the council appears supportive.

The plan hinges on leasing the town-owned property for 40 years, plus planning approval. The association is not seeking town funds for the project and hopes to have it completed by Sept. 15. The \$1.3 million estimate includes funds for a Zamboni ice-treating machine.