

Proposed permit fee hikes for pools, rinks, fields raise eyebrows

Hockey executive urges parents to speak out

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Community Development and Recreation Committee Chair Joe Mihevc knew about a recommendation to raise \$2 million from a 21.5 per cent hike in permit fees for pools, sports fields and rinks two weeks ago, but chose to keep it quiet to avoid muddying public consultation on a new recreation fee policy.

“We didn’t want, especially as we were going into public consultation with the architecture of the plan, to have that debate confused by the angry parents of hockey children,” said Mihevc. “So that’s why we separated the two issues.”

Mihevc made the comments to reporters on Tuesday, the day after Toronto Councillors discovered the fee increases in one of two binders filled with 2008 budget documents. The budget has been public for about a week, but it wasn’t until councillors sat down for their first public meeting with staff Monday that the plan to increase permit fees came to light.

The plan, contained in the detailed briefing notes on the city’s \$8.2 billion operating budget, would see fees for renting ice, sports fields and pools raised by an average of 21.5 per cent in 2008. The specific increases would vary, with commercial rentals going up by 30 per cent, competitive junior hockey raised by 25 per cent and youth and outdoor rinks increasing by 10 per cent.

According to the briefing note, the \$2 million in new revenue would help pay for the city’s new Everybody Gets to Play plan, which changes the way that recreation programs are financed.

The permit fee hikes came as a particular surprise, because when city staff and Mihevc unveiled the Everybody Gets to Play plan in early January, they indicated that the plan to increase fees for programs to a level of 50 per cent cost recovery did not include the fees for permitting sports fields and swimming pools by groups.

“I was certainly under the impression that we were not increasing permit fees,” said Ward 31 (Beaches-East York) Councillor Janet Davis at the meeting. “I reassured the East York Hockey League this wouldn’t happen. I think it’s important that we understand the impact and personally I would like to see how we can reverse that decision.”

Even more shocked were users of city arenas such as the Greater Toronto Hockey League, which will see an increase of 18 per cent to the fees they pay to use Toronto ice.

According to GTHL president John Gardner, that will amount to a \$180,000 hit.

“That’s another \$180,000 kick in the seat of our pants based on what we bought last year,” said Gardner. “We purchased over a million dollars of ice from Toronto arenas. I don’t know what they’re trying to do with hockey.”

The GTHL has about 40,000 young people - 24,000 of them Toronto residents - involved in hockey, and Gardner said he had been led to expect a modest inflationary increase in the fees.

He said parents need to “wake up” and contact their councillors on the issue.

“The parents of this city are going to have to wake up on behalf of their kids,” said Gardner. “Some councillors are going to have to be told politely, if you don’t support this then don’t count on our support the next time there’s an election.”

Budget chief Shelly Carroll pointed out that there is plenty of time to modify the plan before Toronto Council approves the city’s operating budget at the end of March.

“I think we have some work to do on it,” she said. “The proposal that came out Jan. 28 is not what we’ll be passing at the end of March.”

Carroll, who oversees the budget, only saw the proposed fee increase two days before the city unveiled the operating budget to great fanfare Jan. 28 as being the first balanced budget to be introduced in the history of amalgamated Toronto.

Carroll said she was troubled with the lack of clarity leading up to the proposal - particularly with the public insistence on

the part of Mihevc and senior staff that the permit increases weren't part of the Everybody Gets to Play policy, but would be part of the budget process.

In the past, those fees were increased by the cost of living, and Carroll said most councillors believed that would be the case this time.

Mihevc, however, insisted there was no attempt to sneak the fee increases through.

"There was no big plot here, there was no attempt to deceive, all there was to lay out the fact that we wanted to have a policy discussion around this," said Mihevc.

However, Mihevc said he thought the fee increases are likely too high.

"I think we need to find a way to lower that," said Mihevc.