

Recreation field maintenance contract talks resume at Saratoga Springs Board of Education meeting

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SARATOGA SPRINGS — School district officials say they're interested in returning to negotiations with city officials about which entity will ultimately be responsible for running the East and West Side Recreation Fields.

Months-long talks between the school district and the city ended this fall after the district denied the city an increase to its annual \$75,000 contract that it uses to provide field maintenance and facilitate public use of the popular district-owned properties.

As it stands now, the school district will be responsible for these tasks starting Jan. 1.

But Board of Education President Mia Pfitzer opened Tuesday's meeting by stating that the board is interested in continuing dialogue with the city concerning the recreation contract.

Later, Superintendent Dr. Janice White added that she'd received a call last week from Mayor Scott Johnson in which he expressed a renewed interest in talking about the contract. She told reporters Tuesday she would reach out to him as soon as possible.

Pfitzer's announcement at the board meeting was followed by a wave of public comment. Saratoga Springs supervisor Joanne Yepsen urged the district to go back to the drawing board to find a solution in which school officials wouldn't "get totally bogged down" by trying to manage athletic fields.

"The school district's mission shouldn't have to change because of this huge responsibility that someone needs to take on to support our recreation programs," Yepsen said. "The city has the equipment, knowledge and expertise to take care of this. I hope that a multi-year agreement could be reached in the near future so the school district doesn't have to."

White agreed that caring for the fields isn't the district's primary concern.

"Our core mission is the education of students," she said.

In the meantime, however, the administration is operating as if it is taking back the maintenance of the fields.

The Board of Education has been briefed on the district's current user policy and fee structure. The district charges \$26 per hour for use of its fields, compared to the city's seasonal rate of \$150 to \$250 for groups, depending on their size. In addition, the city charges youth groups \$35 and adult groups \$50 to \$100 per 2-1/2-hour practice or game, according to the 2010 Field User Agreement form posted on www.saratoga-springs.org.

But the school district's fees could potentially increase, depending on how officials decide to go forth with field management. White has projected it would cost \$300,000 to \$350,000 initially for the district to take over the fields.

Several speakers said they were concerned that their youth sports leagues' operation would be placed jeopardy — or in some cases, rendered impossible — if they were to be charged the school district's fees to use the fields.

“There's no way we can afford the fees that are proposed,” said Matthew Riker, of Saratoga Pop Warner football and cheerleading. He estimated it would cost the group \$3,200 just to hold practices for the month of August.

“The fees that were proposed (at a meeting with school officials) last week would put an organization like Saratoga National Little League out of business,” said Derrick Legall, who serves as the group's president and is city recreation chairman. “I need to ask you to go back to the table, to reach out to the City Council ... Continue the dialogue please, so we can make sure that everything works for our future, which is our kids.”

Bhavani Kurtz, a city resident whose two children have participated in the recreation leagues, imagined dire consequences if parents could no longer pay for their kids to play.

“They're going to be ending up standing on the street corner doing drugs and smoking cigarettes,” Kurtz said. “Local programs keep our kids active, busy and positive. And I hope you guys can figure out a way to make it work.”

Charles Usas, a Saratoga Springs High School graduate who used the recreation fields in his youth, pointed to the cuts already made by the city and asked the board members to work on an agreement.

“They've made cuts all across the board because the taxpayers can't pay any more money,” Usas said. “You seem like a good group of people, I'll put some faith in you.”