

Saratoga Springs Recreation Center open house set for Tuesday, July 27

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SARATOGA SPRINGS — After almost 19 months of construction and 15 years of conversation, debate, planning, postponements and legal disputes, the Spa City is ready for the grand opening of its own indoor recreation center.

The public will be able to tour the building, located on Vanderbilt Avenue between Lincoln Avenue and Worth Street, with Recreation Department staff and city officials at an open house scheduled to begin at 7 p.m. Tuesday, July 27. Regular gym hours, from 8 a.m. to

9 p.m. Monday through Friday, are set to begin the following day. Camp Saradac has been operating at the facility since July 6.

Along with campers and recreation department personnel, who moved into their new offices in the facility in June, the building houses a gymnasium with a two-lane walking track and markings for four United States junior high school-size basketball courts, two collegiate size courts, two large tournament style volleyball courts and four smaller volleyball courts.

A racquetball court with markings for racquetball, handball, squash and equipment for Wallyball (a variation of volleyball) is located at the far end of the gym.

“The mindset is to make sure that the residents of Saratoga Springs have this facility for use first,” said Derrick Legall, chairman of the city’s Recreation Commission.

City residents and those who live within the Saratoga Springs City School District will be able to register for identification cards, which will allow them to use the facility during open gym hours free of charge.

Non-residents will be charged \$5 per session to use the gym, and use of the racquetball court will cost city and district residents \$5 per hour and non-residents \$10 per hour.

Community interaction

“I don’t want this to come off as just a basketball facility,” Legall said, referring to the community room, kitchen and game room with ping-pong, billiards and select video games on the side of the building opposite the racquetball court. The game room will also be open to the public during regular hours at no charge.

The Recreation Commission is prepared to reach out to the school district and Skidmore College for purposes of organizing after-school tutoring programs in the community room.

“We plan on doing after-school programs and activities,” said Recreation Department director Linda Terricola, who will solicit the help of the city’s senior citizens for a series of “intergenerational cooperative programs.”

“It’s a dream come true,” Terricola said of the building, evoking the names of five mayors whose administrations either considered or acted on making the facility a reality, including Mayor Scott Johnson, whom she called “the mover and the shaker.”

“I think the community should recognize that this is the result of the collective effort of many, many people over almost two decades,” said Johnson, who has advocated for completing the facility since before first taking office in 2008.

Over many years, \$6.5 million was bonded for the center over many years by several city government administrations. Previous to bonds, proceeds from the 2003 sale of the former Excelsior Avenue Ice Rink site were allocated for development of an indoor facility.

Johnson said construction costs are on track to come in more than \$600,000 under budget.

Revenue and cost

The facility is expected to cost \$200,000 per year for all operating expenditures, a figure that will come in at about half that amount this year because of the mid year opening. In its first full year of operation, the facility is expected to bring in \$175,000 in revenue, resulting in a net cost to the city of between \$25,000 and \$50,000.

The gymnasium and the community room will be rentable for groups to plan tournaments or events. Rental of one smaller basketball court will be \$45 per hour. Two will be available for \$95 per hour and all four courts will be available for \$195 per hour.

Groups will be charged in two-hour blocks for use of the community room: \$20 per block for local nonprofits, \$25 per block for nonprofits based outside the city and the school district and \$30 per block for all ordinary businesses.

An additional fee schedule for the use of the community room, gym space and kitchen for birthday parties and fees for locker rentals should be finalized for City Council consideration by September. The rooms will not be available for rental until the facility extends hours for the fall on Sept. 7.

Also in September, the field at “00 Vanderbilt Ave.,” a parcel next to the facility purchased by the city for inclusion in the project, will be seeded and prepared for use.

Johnson said it was determined that seeding the field, which will be available for open play, will wait until the summer heat subsides.

“They’re very pleased with what they see,” Terricola said of residents who have stopped in to see the facility during

camp hours, a far cry from feelings expressed by some neighbors when plans to build at the South Side location were first announced.

In December 2008, the neighborhood group Friends of the South Side Park sued the city for alleged violations of zoning ordinance, oversights in plan review and violation of the city charter.

In February 2009, a temporary restraining order was served related to the case, which stopped construction briefly, followed by a stop bid order issued by the New York State Department of Labor after union representatives claimed the city violated state law requiring municipalities request separate bids for general construction, plumbing, heating, ventilation and electrical systems. The order was lifted in less than a month after the city agreed to have Bast Hatfield sub-bid the three remaining trades.

“Most people realize that it was an underutilized field with seasonal use,” Johnson said of the decision to build on the former South Side Recreation Fields, a selection Johnson called a “no brainer.” Previous proposed locations included the West Side Recreation Field and space near the city’s ice rink on Weibel Avenue.

“The biggest difference is that now we have a building that will allow us to have some structure to our programs,” Legall said.

The new facility will host city-run programs and workshops, like those for basketball, which have previously taken place at rented venues. Use of the new facility will eliminate those costs, at a savings of up to \$60,000 for the city.

Legall said the immediate focus of the Recreation Commission will be finding ways to ensure the new facility operates at no cost to the city. “I’m optimistic that we can make that happen,” Terricola said, noting that the budget may not balance in the first six months of operation, but is expected to come close over the next year.

Johnson said projections show a nearly cost-neutral operation in 2012, with a modest profit expected in the following years.

City Council to address staffing at July 20 meeting

Officials are prioritizing a complete list of necessary furniture, fixtures and equipment, one-time expenditures not covered by bonds that could total as much as \$200,000.

“For now, we have to make due,” Deputy Mayor Shauna Sutton said on a recent tour of the facility, echoing the mayor’s sentiment that the installation of additional furnishings and amenities would depend on the state of the city’s finances in the coming years.

About \$115,000 of total furnishing expenditures have been allocated from the capital budget for essentials, like bleachers and scoreboards, which are set to be installed in the coming weeks. Other amenities, like a rock-climbing wall and drop-down batting cages, will be installed as funds become available either through the city or as donations. The department is also conducting an inventory of existing sports equipment to determine its future needs.

Staffing for the facility is expected to be addressed at the City Council meeting on July 20. Johnson said he has been in discussion with Public Works Commissioner Anthony “Skip” Scirocco about appropriate staffing levels based on the needs of the facility and the city’s budget.

“We can’t operate the facility without it being properly maintained,” said Johnson, who is examining the best ways existing staff can be utilized.

“We pretty much know what has to be done in there maintenance wise,” Scirocco said, pinning the number of full-time

employees needed for the facility at two or three. A team of five DPW employees currently oversees maintenance of the East Side, West Side and North Side recreation fields.

Johnson said he would remain in discussion with Scirocco to determine staffing needs.