

Hockey teams in Aurora seek reduced ice rental fees

Hockey clubs in Aurora are looking for a reduction in ice rental fees after experiencing impacts on revenue due to the pandemic.

The Aurora Tigers Jr A Hockey Club faced three years of losses due to the pandemic, said Sierra Costa, General Manager for the Tigers who spoke at the General Committee meeting on June 20 in place of the club's owners.

"These losses come from lack of sponsorship and fan attendance since entering a post-pandemic world," she said.

To keep the hockey club going, the Aurora Tigers requested to receive a reduced ice rate to \$100 per hour in order to keep the team playing in the Ontario Junior A Hockey League (OJHL).

The benefits of reducing the ice rate will help the greater community as well, they said.

Costa noted that the Aurora Tigers lead the OJHL in community functions by visiting local schools or with the Salvation Army kettle campaign, the Yellow Brick House, and the Southlake Foundation—just a few of the community events the club took part in last season.

She added that the club is working with a local school bus company to help sponsor school buses for local community schools in order to have more students attend hockey games as a school field trip.

"Junior A Hockey is a foundation for young men's success, as they will be well cultured with discipline and commitment to be committed throughout their life," Costa said.

As a semi-pro team, the club has recruited nine local AA players over the past season, putting them at the top of the OJHL in AA recruitment.

The men recruited to the team often receive scholarships and attend universities while pursuing their hockey careers.

Currently, over 50 former Aurora Tiger alumni are playing in the National Hockey League (NHL).

To address their financial strain, the team has also looked at creating more consistent sources of revenue.

"We are creating a variety of ticket packaging to allow fans to attend our games that will keep them coming back," Costa said. "We have also brought back our season pass tickets. We have a new team of people to bring in more sponsorship to offset the expenses. Our goal is to break even each season, and we will continue to work towards that. The Aurora Tiger Jr A organization is a value to our community."

Jenn Vaicunas, Head Trainer for the Aurora Tigers Jr A Hockey Club, added that the hockey rink is a space that many players call home.

"It's a place of healing and connection, a place to belong and a place to call home. In fact, during the season we spend more time as our own family in our rink home than we actually do in our homes. We love it that much," she said.

The rink in Aurora has seen many wins over the past few years that Vaicunas worked in the industry. "Not one but two national championships have been brought home to Aurora," she said.

The Central York Girls Hockey Association was also present at the General Committee meeting to advocate for OJHL and Ontario Women's Hockey Association (OWHA) ice rental fees.

Expenses have quickly accrued due to several reasons, said head coach Steve Dempsey. Not only has the league doubled the number of their regular season games, they also faced doubled bus rental costs for out-of-town games. Furthermore, a four-official system (two referees and two linesman) has been put in place to build more parity between male and female games.

"We also have a lot more showcase tournaments that we have to go to in order for our players to have these opportunities to be seen by universities or to be seen provincially, or by the national team," Dempsey said.

Noting the impact of the hockey association in the greater community, Dempsey listed Hope House, 360 Kids and Covenant House as a few examples of how the female hockey team has sought to support other young females in less fortunate circumstances.

Councillors acknowledged the immense importance of hockey in Aurora in building future leaders and creating opportunities across the community.

"I think anything that we can do to help, you know? create a more thriving atmosphere for the women and men in our community to succeed in this. And it's not just about hockey; it's, as you mentioned, about creating opportunities, where scholarships prepare our kids to go out and learn at the highest level as well. And so we appreciate everything that you give back to the community," said Mayor Tom Mrakas.

Council approved the recommended reduced ice rental fees for the Ontario Junior Hockey League (OJHL) Aurora Tigers Jr. A and the Ontario Women's Hockey Association (OWHA) Central York Panthers hockey teams; and authorized staff to enter in a shared rink board advertising agreement with the Central York Girls Hockey Association, in accordance with the terms outlined.

By Elisa Nguyen