

Ice time, cost pit customers against South Tahoe officials

Publisher's note: *This is the first of two stories about the South Lake Tahoe Ice Arena.*

By Kathryn Reed

Some customers of the South Lake Tahoe Ice Arena are getting a colder reception than the temperature inside the rink. And it's uncomfortably icy in there.

"First and foremost we need to recognize the problems before we can address them. We can't be in denial. I'm not," City Manager Tony O'Rourke said. "From the number of people I've talked to I believe there is validity. There is some consistency in the issues raised. Some call it complaints. I call it customer feedback."



Chris Hawken
and Rob Swain
talk about the
ice rink.
Photos/Kathryn
Reed

The issues have been raised for years, but nothing has changed. Until now. Change has started with a new city manager and recreation director. (Stan Sherer starts in January, but will be in town Thursday to meet with some ice rink users who

are dissatisfied with the customer service.)

Disagreements about ice time among the user groups and favoritism are some of the reasons for the discontent.

As with most ice rinks, there are three main groups using the ice – the public, hockey players and figure skaters.

A meeting Nov. 29 among nearly 40 stakeholders and three city officials has created a thawing of emotions.

“There is change coming. We perceive a huge light at the end of the tunnel,” said Joanie Malarchuk, a figure skating coach. “With regards to figure skating ice time, we don’t have consistent ice time year after year, month after month, day to day.”

Looking at the six-week calendar posted on the arena’s website proves her point. The freestyle listing is for figure skaters.

Inconsistency makes it difficult for Malarchuk and other coaches to grow the figure skating program when they can’t tell clients what days/hours are available for training on a long-term basis.

Some users didn’t want to speak to *Lake Tahoe News* for fear it would cause a setback in the progress being made.

Rob Swain, who runs the rink that opened in May 2002, says flexibility is needed to accommodate everyone.

Figure skaters need the ice at 23 degrees, while hockey players have it at 19 degrees. The former can shatter the ice with their skate tips if the ice is too cold.

In between user groups the \$80,000 Zamboni makes the sheet usable again.

The rink has about 73 hours of programs a week out of a possible 168 hours. To have the rink open it requires at least

one person at the desk and possibly a skate guard depending on the users.

Chris Cefalu, who is credited with keeping the A league hockey program going, is content with what is going on.

“There is no unhappiness. I think the rink cooperated with me,” Cefalu said. He blames the economy for the dwindling number of hockey players and the desire to have fewer games.

Swain said with South Tahoe being the only rink in the region (Reno no longer has one) people travel more than an hour for this sheet of ice. This can present scheduling issues.

The ice rink costs \$270/hour to rent. The December 2010 fee schedule says adult hockey leagues pay \$260/hour. It costs a local resident \$7.50 during public skate time. Figure skaters pay \$12/hour.

“More transparency is causing some resentment because people want the same deal,” Swain said.

Swain said hockey players want to renegotiate what they are paying. Swain, who is a hockey player and has kids in the sport, said hockey players are subsidizing the ice rink.

However, it is not unusual for various user groups at other ice rinks to pay different rates. What’s unusual are the constant changes, and not sticking with a posted and department approved payment plan.

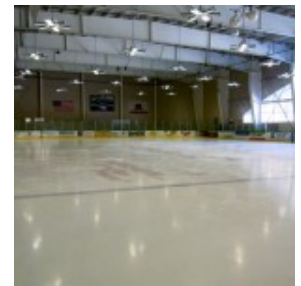
These types of rate fluctuations could be considered a gift of public funds – which is illegal.

Swain says it’s just part of doing business – trying to appease users by making deals regarding rates.

But Swain, during a four-hour interview with *Lake Tahoe News* this week, admitted he has bent to pressure from different user groups to offer payment plans that have not remained

consistent over time.

Looking for resolution



The South Tahoe ice rink is often not used, but still people argue about access.

Swain is defensive about what is going on at the rink. He is not thrilled someone outside the department was brought in to handle disgruntled customers. But customers said their complaints were met with silence – not even an answer to why something could not change.

Nancy Kerry is the city employee tasked with devising a plan for the ice rink. Although her job as No. 2 in the Redevelopment and Housing Department might seem like an odd choice, it's her background as a former assistant city manager that gives her the skills for such a job.

“I needed a fresh approach. I was not satisfied with the institutional response,” O'Rourke said. “She has been a very good facilitator.”

Interim parks Director Chris Hawken, who did not get the top job, told *Lake Tahoe News* he is fine with having someone else take a look at what is going on at the rink.

“I see a downfall on our side is we need better communication,” Hawken said. “Afterward, people said ‘if we had known all that was going on, we wouldn’t have had to come to the meeting.’ We do listen to concerns.”

He is referencing the Nov. 29 meeting facilitated by Kerry, with himself and Swain in attendance.

Hawken said ideas in recreation tend to be cyclical. He thinks that is part of what is going on at the 8-year-old facility.

O’Rourke and Kerry disagree because the complaints have been going on for years without resolution. Swain acknowledged stacks of emails have been presented to higher ups.

Kerry said her goals include creating consistent policies, a coaches’ manual, and developing customer service directives for staff.