

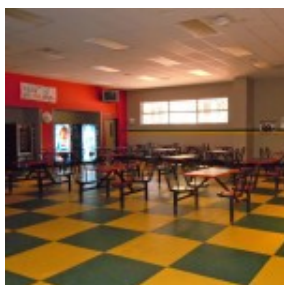
Ice rink operators want Tahoe facility to be a destination

By Kathryn Reed

Saturday marks one full month since South Lake Tahoe turned the ice rink keys over to private operators.

The most noticeable difference walking in is the retail shop on the right is not there. Instead, those goods are being moved to the left of the front doors, with office space being taken out. More of the core offices are by the front counter.

“We want the whole building to flow better and for there to be more things to do while people are here,” explained Van Oleson, who with Chris Cefalu are the owners of the privately held Tahoe Sports Entertainment, the operators of the rink.



Operators of the South Lake Tahoe ice rink are making changes.

Photo/LTN

They have a range of plans for the sheet of ice – but want to implement them in a strategic manner. While ultimately making money is the goal, providing the right mix of programs with superb customer service top the to-do list.

However, cleaning and organizing things have taken up more time than anticipated.

“This place was just absolutely cluttered,” Oleson said while sitting in his office at the rink.

Working on the feasibility of plans and developing a time line to implement the changes are in the works. More concrete plans should be forthcoming later this year. TSE is still working on its website.

What used to be the retail shop is being turned into a café. The rinks’ operators have made the center an Internet hot spot so people needing to get some work done or just wanting to be online can do so.

Cameras that will be installed in the arena will allow those in the café to see what is going on. Those televisions will also broadcast NHL and other sports programs. Once the license is secure, beer and wine will be sold at the café.

“We hope the effect is a coffee house atmosphere,” Oleson said. He admits, though, that after the men’s leagues, the noise level in the café is bound to escalate.

But the whole goal is with the café upfront it will attract more people.

Vending machines in the back where the “old” café is are likely to be eliminated.

That whole area could be opened up – possibly turning it into an exercise room with free weights, machines or even a Pilates studio.

While changing the look and adding things to the facility are happening, the management team is keenly aware of the need to focus on the ice.

Cefalu said things have been streamlined, with the cost of

some leagues being lowered to be more affordable. The goal is to build up the number of people using the arena.

“We want to do more so kids come in. It’s very underused by kids,” Cefalu said.

While the city had a partnership with Lake Tahoe Unified School District for third-graders to learn to skate, Cefalu and Oleson want more than just that age group.

Part of their approach is getting the word out the city has a rink, put a Tahoe identity behind the rink and ultimately make it a destination for people beyond the basin.

Oleson said that while Lake Tahoe is known for winter sports athletes, they are on the slopes, not the ice. He wants to change that.

“We just hosted the founder of the largest international hockey camp to discuss a lot of possibilities with the rink,” Oleson said. “We are working with a former NHL player to create a destination event. We are working with figure skating for events.”

Already the rink has secured the Pee Wee tournament for February. This could fill a couple hundred room nights on the South Shore.

If the Tahoe-Reno area is awarded the 2022 Winter Olympics, as some hope will happen, the ice rink owners want their ice to be used as a training or practice facility.

Cefalu also said discussions have begun with Lake Tahoe Community College to integrate the two entities.

To go forward completely with their plans, Oleson and Cefalu need the recreation JPA board to amend the bond structure of Measure S because private entities cannot make money from tax-exempt bonds. No meeting is on the books to make this happen.

The city chose to seek a private operator of the rink because it had been losing about \$100,000 a year for a few years on the 9-year-old facility. Tahoe Sports and Entertainment is paying the city \$2,000 a month in rent for the first year; \$3,000 month after that. Beginning Oct. 1, 2012, 3 percent of gross revenue above \$600,000 will be the city's; 4 percent the next year; with it capping at 5 percent starting Oct. 1, 2014.