



THE BUFFALO NEWS

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Western team members react to the introduction of their team during the Opening Ceremonies of the Empire State Games at Binghamton University in July.

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Updated: 01/06/09 08:35 AM

Empire State Games may be downsized

Each participant could be charged \$300

By Niki Cervantes
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Some sports could be eliminated and others sharply cut for the Empire State Games if organizers have to deal with a “worst case” plan that involves the possibility of no state spending on the annual summer competition.

Young athletes also may soon be required to pay \$300 to take part in the Games, a Western New York organizer warned Monday.

Lou Reuter, western regional director for the Empire State Games, said the changes under consideration could be averted by a public outcry and the continued willingness of the state to underwrite a portion of the cost of the Games as organizers finalize plans for this year’s competition in Poughkeepsie.

If not, Reuter said, the consequences to the Games could be dire.

“I can understand that everyone is having to take a hit,” he said, because of the weak economy and state budget crisis. “But it’s almost like the demise of the Empire State Games.”

Reuter maintained the Games “didn’t get a penny” in the 2009-10 state parks and recreation budget proposed by Gov. David A. Paterson, a contention a state budget official disputed.

“It is not funded through a specific line item in the budget,” said Matt Anderson, a spokesman for the state budget division.

Parks and recreation, like other state agencies, is still in the midst of figuring out how to cut 10 percent, as Paterson ordered, so no final figures are available.

The State Legislature also is working on its own version of the budget, which could change the funding picture for the Games. The budget is due in April.

“We do anticipate that the Games will continue,” Anderson said.

But in what form? Last year, the state provided \$1.7 million of the total \$2.3 million cost of the Games, Reuter said, so as the state grapples with a budget crisis, Games organizers have had to plan for the worst.

Gone could be trials for some sports because the organization can’t afford to line up venues for tryouts. Gone too, could be transportation to and from the Games, plus room and board in local dormitories that the organization provided to adult athletes.

They could show up to the Games if they want to compete, “but they pay their own freight,” Reuter said.

The \$300 fee for scholastic athletes would cover the cost of transportation and room and board for them.

The City of Buffalo has been selected to host the 2010 Hugh L. Carey Empire State Summer Games. The Games, one of the largest amateur athletic programs in the nation, features nearly 6,000 of New York’s finest athletes participating in 28 Olympic-style sports.

Ralph Galanti, a retired athletic director at Erie Community College, is the local organizing chairman for the 2010 Games in Buffalo. He said he knew the cuts were coming but is determined not to force scholastic athletes to pay to play.

“You can’t make these kids pay. A lot of the poor-income families won’t be able to afford it,” Galanti said. “It will eliminate a lot of the good athletes and take away from the prestige of the Games. Instead of having the elite and best players, only the people who can afford will be there. That’s not the true meaning of the Empire State Games.”

Organizers are starting a campaign to lobby legislators for funding, hoping enough letters, e-mails and other communications will persuade the state to provide financial support.

“We hope that with enough pressure, they will provide some funding,” Reuter said.

The Buffalo Games will mark the 33rd year of the program and will run July 21-25 in 2010.

Meanwhile, the cut list is long for the Games in the Poughkeepsie area this July. Included is basketball for adults, boxing and sailing for all ages, soccer for adult men and women and softball for adults.

Adult volleyball and wrestling for adults also could be eliminated.

Field hockey, gymnastics, rugby, tennis and swimming are among the sports that remain mostly intact.

Reuter said the cut in funding for the Games would have a ripple effect on the economy, with fewer events drawing fewer athletes, friends and family — and fewer dollars for lodging for guests and fewer sales tax dollars as well.

The Games are “a tremendous boon to all the host communities,” he said.

News Sports Reporter Mary Jo Monnin contributed to this report.

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