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Girls may get the chance to play hockey for their schools if a girls league becomes a reality in the 2010-11 school year. Right now, the only option for girls is to play in town recreation leagues like this one in Amherst.

Derek Gee/Buffalo News file photo

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FOCUS: GIRLS HOCKEY

Ice hockey league for girls could tip off in 2010

Five teams are needed to make league viable

By Sandra Tan
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

In one more year, girl hockey players may finally have the chance to break the ice in their school colors.

A special committee of athletic directors has recommended that a regional girls varsity ice hockey league be launched in the 2010-11 school year. The committee also recommended that interested school districts prepare by fielding intra-district ice hockey games, scrimmages and clinics this coming school year.

That's good news for Williamsville Central School District parent and sports law professor Helen Drew-Meosky, who has five girls and two boys, all playing hockey except for the 3-year-old who wants to start in the fall.

"Hurrah!" said Drew-Meosky, before adding, "I would have hoped the timetable would have been quicker, but that's minimal compared to the fact that we actually appear to be moving forward with it."

Currently, the only area high school that sponsors a girls team is Nichols, a private school, even though it's estimated that roughly 900 girls ages 18 and under play ice hockey on community recreation teams in Western New York.

While girls with strong ability are allowed to play on schoolsponsored boys varsity teams, parents complain that their daughters are overlooked for scholarships, miss out on locker room camaraderie, and have higher chances of being hurt because boys hockey allows checking while girls hockey doesn't.

Administrators for athletic programs in Williamsville, Amherst, Clarence, Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda, Sweet Home, Niagara Wheatfield, West Seneca, Lancaster and Orchard Park and the Monsignor Martin Athletic Association have met several times since December to consider the viability of a new Girls Ice Hockey Federation.

The Williamsville district and Monsignor Martin High School Athletic Association, which represents the Catholic schools, have committed to each fielding a team in 2010-11. But the Girls' Ice Hockey Development Committee said a mini-mum of five teams is necessary to make any new league viable.

That means three more school districts must make the commitment to fielding a team by December for the league to launch next year, said Williamsville Athletic Director James Rusin, who spearheaded the committee.

He added that he is "cautiously optimistic" that enough districts will commit to make a league possible. Some adjoining districts also could consider combining resources and students to field a single, cross-district team for this emerging school sport.

The committee has estimated that it would cost each participating school district \$24,500 to field a team. That figure includes the cost of coach stipends, league fees, practice ice time, uniforms and transportation.

Players are typically responsible for buying some of their own equipment.

A new girls varsity league would come too late for Drew- Meosky's older daughter, who will be a senior next year, but not too late for her goaltending 13-year-old.

"I just want that experience on the ice," said Theresa Meosky, a seventh-grader who already plays modified lacrosse for Williamsville East High School. "You get to play together and show that you really care for your school."

Unlike in boys varsity ice hockey, the Girls' Ice Hockey Development Committee is recommending that seventh- and eighth-graders also be considered for girls varsity teams because it's not a contact sport, and girls mature faster than boys.

Rusin said the biggest barrier to getting firmer commitments by Section VI school districts to field girls teams in a

new league was a directive by the New York State Public High School Athletic Association early this year requiring schools to slash the number of athletic competitions in all sports.

Attempting to launch a new, regional varsity program at a time when districts are being forced to scale back their established programs was a tough sell, Rusin said.

“It was a bombshell,” he said.

If a full-scale league is not possible by 2010-11, the Girls’ Ice Hockey Development Committee recommends the continuation of lower-level, schoolsponsored ice hockey opportunities for girls as well as the formation of a club program.

Drew-Meosky said parent advocates will devote the coming months to ensuring that other districts commit to fielding teams to make a new regional league viable.

“Not only is the interest there, but the ability is, too, and we look forward to having the opportunity to show that to them,” she said, regarding uncommitted school districts.

She also said parents are ready to start developing booster clubs to work on fundraising efforts for the girls teams. Traditionally, such clubs play a major role in offsetting the costs associated with the expensive sport.

stan@buffnews.com

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