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REGIONAL RINK FACTS •
 Playing surfaces Erie, Niagara counties* 26 • League hockey players in WNY 20,179 • Cost of “prime” ice time \$165–\$180 per hour • Typical cost of new rink \$4 million *Available for public amateur hockey; excludes professional and recreational skating-only rinks Source: Buffalo News research
 Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News



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FOCUS: RECREATION

Cost chills outlook as demand swells for local ice rinks

Economic slowdown doesn't dull interest

By Fred O. Williams
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Being a hockey dad is just the beginning for Dave Ryerse. He's also a hockey coach and a hockey uncle.

The Evans man drove to Hamburg last week with his hockey-playing sons, nephew and one niece. All were there to hear about plans for a new rink backed by ex-Sabres star Dave Andreychuk.

"We definitely need more [ice]," Ryerse said.

It's a common refrain in the hockey-mad Buffalo region: more ice, the kind that's flat, well-lit and groomed by a Zamboni, and hockey lovers are looking beyond tapped-out local governments to provide it.

Rink proponents say they need fresh ice to house burgeoning hockey and skating programs for adults and kids as well as accommodate an influx of girls who are seeking hockey parity with boys. Plans are in the works for new rinks in East Aurora, Clarence, Lockport and Hamburg.

The economic slowdown that seems to have touched every aspect of life has left ice hockey — with its high-priced equipment and expensive ice time costs — almost unscathed.

"We're bursting at the seams," said Robert Schreck, president of 1,500-strong Amherst Youth Hockey Association. "The next frontier is the girls' program."

Schreck said he plans to float the idea for a fifth ice surface at Amherst's quad-rink Pepsi Center to support rising demand.

But with 26 playing surfaces already in Erie and Niagara counties, cash-strapped local governments are wary about putting more money into ice, which usually requires a subsidy from taxpayers.

"Nobody's got the money to do it," said David Braunstein, president of the West Section of the New York State Amateur Hockey Association, the parent organization for local youth and adult leagues. New rinks typically cost at least \$4 million for a single surface, \$7 million for two.

Outlook in Hamburg

In Hamburg, for example, the 940-member Hamburg Hawks youth league is forced to buy about 40 percent of its ice-time in other towns, president Steve Holmes said. But the Town Board is looking to the private sector for ways to twin its existing rink.

"Especially in these economic times, we don't want to come to taxpayers and say, 'Your taxes are going up so we can build a new ice rink,'" Hamburg Town Supervisor Steven Walters said.

Under the proposal filed with the town, Andreychuk's company would lease the existing rink on Lakeview Road and build a twin. Revenue from a new restaurant and renovated pro shop — plus a likely increase in ice fees — would help pay the bills.

If the company fails, it would guarantee only one-third of the financing from its own capital. That leaves up to two-thirds potentially left at the town's doorstep, something that concerned residents at the meeting. There was applause when one speaker advocated a public referendum on the idea.

Municipal thrift could put a freeze on new hockey and skating venues — but it also has fired up the fighting spirit of legions of hockey parents.

“A bunch of moms and dads basically threw up this rink,” said Tony DiFilippo, president of the Aurora Ice Association. The nonprofit group used volunteer labor to assemble the outdoor rink in East Aurora, the region’s newest rink.

Built from parts of the outdoor rink used for the Winter Classic at Ralph Wilson Stadium, the Aurora rink opened Nov. 1 and is already booked for the year.

“It’s been overwhelming,” DiFilippo said.

Plans to make the temporary rink a permanent, indoor, twin-ice facility have been put on the shelf for now, however. While the demand is there, the corporate support and bank financing are lacking, at least for now, to make the \$8 million-to- \$12 million plan a reality.

“Rinks are not money makers,” he said. “You can about cover your operating expenses, but they don’t make anybody rich.”

Rink economics make it hard to run in the black, even with high demand. During “prime time” on evenings and weekends, area rinks charge an average of \$165 to \$180 an hour for league play, managers said. But they can charge only a fraction of that during weekdays, when business is slow. Seasonal rinks cut their operating costs when they close for the summer, but their mortgage payments don’t take a break.

Privatizing trend

Hamburg’s rink loses about \$100,000 a year, according to Walters, although other officials say the facility should break even now that its debt is extinguished. The Amherst Pepsi Center, whose four rinks draw players from as far away as Alaska for national tournaments, costs taxpayers \$480,000 a year, general manager Eric Guzdek said. That’s down from more than \$1 million in 2004.

The economic spin-off from drawing thousands of visitors more than outweighs the direct cost to taxpayers, he added.

“I’m not a big fan of privatization,” Guzdek said. Prices for ice time could rise out of reach for average residents, he said. “You’d have to be careful.”

But the private sector is where new ice projects are heading for support, not just in Hamburg and East Aurora.

In Clarence, an idea for a rink complex is being circulated as a private-sector venture, Supervisor Scott Bylewski said. The town government hasn’t been approached in connection with the project, which would make use of some existing industrial buildings on Roll Road. Area resident Scotty Bowman, the legendary ex-NHL coach, is supporting the fledgling project with advice.

Similarly in Lockport, a development group plans to convert a former Sears building into an ice arena, conserving costs.

“It’s downtown, so it has all the infrastructure, parking — a lot of this stuff is already accomplished,” said Jim Cain, president of Firland Management of Lewiston, Maine, which is developing the Lockport rink’s business plan.

It’s said that Western New York is crazy about hockey, and the numbers back that up. The West region of the hockey association registers 1,500 teams — about five times the number in other upstate metros, Braunstein said. In all, there are about 20,000 players registered in the West section, he said.

The region even trumps the populous New York City suburbs, which register about 1,000 teams — and where ice time can cost \$500 an hour.

Will the economic crisis take down Buffalo's appetite for ice?

"It's the most expensive sport to play," Braunstein admitted.

Players pay about \$400 per season for league registration, which covers ice time, and equipment can be costly.

Sabres lit a fire

League membership across the region boomed after the Buffalo Sabres 1999 run to the Stanley Cup finals, but has held about constant in recent years, he said. That's not a bad showing, he added, considering the area's weak economy and declining population.

Cain, whose company manages rinks across the country, including the one in East Aurora, said other cities have watched hockey activity plunge. Registration of entry-level players fell 30 percent in Chicago this year, for example.

"I'm not sure if we haven't seen the downturn, or we haven't seen it yet," he said. But when it comes to hockey, Buffalo just isn't like other towns.

"Generally, the Buffalo market is as strong as the Canadian market," Cain said, "in terms of the willingness of parents to have their kids in hockey."

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