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NEWS LOCAL

Council nixes staff report on arena leasing

By Elaine Della-Mattia, Sault Star

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A divided city council resulted in a failed bid to get staff to pen a report about the pros and cons of leasing the McMeeken Centre to a private operator.

The 4-4 recorded vote means the motion, raised by Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker, was defeated, ultimately putting an early end to the debate that has already created some controversy in Sault Ste. Marie.

The motion asked that staff examine the benefits and detriments that could result from leasing the aging west end arena to a private operator.

Shoemaker told city council that he was only asking staff for a report on the issue and that he knows the "privatization boogymen" issue has been raised in the community.

"I'm simply asking for a staff report. . . It doesn't mean we're getting rid of public assets," he told council.

Shoemaker said there could be a number of possibilities that would help the city in eliminating or reducing its budgetary shortfalls, something council has been working towards for some time.

Ward 2 Coun. Susan Myers said he was opposed to the resolution, even if it was only calling for a report.

"I think we already have a sense where we want to go," she said. "Taxpayers built this facility like many others."

Myers said it's a well-known fact that community centres result in financial losses but are a delight to residents and users. "They are built by taxpayers for taxpayers."

Similarly she said convention centres can also be a money-losing operation to municipalities however they draw people with their events and bookings, resulting in cash registers ringing in other ways.

"I am philosophically opposed to a private operator making money off a taxpayer facility," she said.

Letters against the resolution were submitted to city council by two hockey organizations, the Soo Pee Wee and the Sault Minor Hockey Association.

The Soo Pee Wee said the leasing of the Rankin Arena has resulted in lost ice time to the hockey community as a whole. In addition, less opportunity to lease ice time from the city results in the inability to grow local tournaments that attract out-of-town teams.

SMHA also makes reference to the "deep pockets" that resulted in a lease arrangement at the Rankin Arena, resulting other hockey organizations reducing their schedules.

The SMHA requests that if the city does study a leasing option for the city-owned facility, that it also consult with user groups to explore other options that may also be available.

Ward 1 Coun. Steve Butland said arenas have always been subsidized and he too is against their privatization.

Butland suggested that if there is a private operator interested in the facility, then he/she should come to the table and state their intentions.

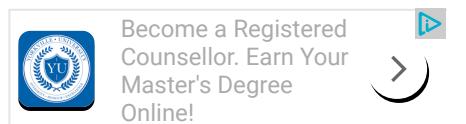
Shoemaker countered that without the resolution, a potential private operator may be discouraged from raising the ideas.

Councillors supporting the resolution include Butland, Marchy Bruni, Matthew Shoemaker and Frank Fata.

Councillors against asking staff to report on the issue include Myers, Huppenen, Turco and Krmpotich.

Mayor Christian Provenzano was travelling on city business.

Councillors Rick Niro, Paul Christian and Ross Romano declared conflicts.



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