



Opposition mounts against plan for new user fees

Councillors cross traditional political divisions over contentious recreation proposal as public prepares to weigh in

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In a revolt that cuts across political lines, allies and critics of Mayor David Miller are pushing hard to rewrite a proposed rise in user fees for recreation.

The stiff opposition comes as an uneasy public is set to have its say tomorrow night at a special meeting of council's community development and recreation committee.

The draft plan, intended to boost access to city-funded fitness and sports activities, has triggered an intense political debate between those who demand free programs for all and those who say user fees are a fiscal reality.

"We are in listening mode for this week," committee chairman Joe Mihevc (Ward 21, St. Paul's) said yesterday, conceding some elements are "in flux." But after this week's public input, he added, "we have to land our plane and figure out what to do."

In one measure of the unusual political divisions this issue has created, the mayoral loyalist is endorsing a call for increased user fees that has angered others in the mayor's camp, such as Pam McConnell, Kyle Rae and Gord Perks.

Councillor Karen Stintz, a frequent critic of the mayor, supports higher fees.

Behind the scenes, Mr. Mihevc, budget chief Shelley Carroll and other advocates are trying to massage the proposed measure to make it more palatable to councillors, in time for a council vote in early March.

Critics, including Councillor Adam Vaughan (Ward 20, Trinity-Spadina), say they still have more questions than answers to what proponents concede is a "complex" proposal.

"You have to stop selling this policy and start finding solutions," said the councillor, who often supports the mayor.

Without revisions, several councillors hope to put off a council vote.

"I have some real concern with the shortness of time we have to consider this," said Councillor David Shiner (Ward 24, Willowdale), a member of council's right-wing minority.

Another critic, left-leaning Councillor Maria Augimeri (Ward 9, York Centre) sees the proposal as a cover to raise revenue for the cash-starved recreation department.

"If it were not for the city's financial constraints this report would not be before us," she said. "It is driven by money."

After information sessions held last week, Ms. Carroll, the budget chief, said she heard clearly from the public about the "need to make adjustments," including how to assist low-income families whose income level is just over the cut-off for a city subsidy.

Heather McGregor, executive director of the YWCA of Greater Toronto, one of those expected to speak to councillors tomorrow, supports free access to recreation.

"Recreation programs are supposed to be a preventive measure in society," she said. "To expect people to bottom out economically before you let them in does not make a lot of sense."

Ms. Carroll said a gradual increase in fees for some programs (a session that now costs \$27 could rise to \$47 by 2015) would help the city expand some free activities.

But any increase is too much, contended right-wing Councillor Frances Nunziata (Ward 11, York South-Weston).

"My constituents cannot afford to pay and I don't want them left out," she said.

Ms. Carroll said going to all-free programs is unrealistic.

"That would be fine if we went back to what we delivered when it was free," she said, referring to introductory-level programs delivered by the pre-amalgamation city of Toronto. Now, she noted, the city delivers more activities, including high-end skills.

What has stirred the greatest alarm is elimination of 20 so-called "priority centres," unevenly scattered across the city, that offer a mix of drop-in and free programs. In future, these community centres would have to charge for some programs, with a subsidy for low-income families.

Last week, at one such centre in Parkdale, people were playing a pick-up game of basketball, Ping-Pong and pool.

What appeals most to Jamaica-born Michael Bernard, a student at York University, is the chance to hang out with a diverse crowd.

On this particular evening at Masaryk-Cowan, he seized the chance to play a competitive game of Ping-Pong with a young man from Tibet.

Like others, Mr. Bernard wondered aloud whether an increase in fees would discourage the very people the new policy aims to serve.

The details

The draft proposal on recreation fees has several key elements:

Higher user fees, so the city recovers 50 per cent of the cost to deliver a slightly expanded range of recreation programs. On average, user fees would rise 21.5 per cent this year and 10 per cent a year for 2009-2014.

An expansion of free programs, including swimming lessons for Grade 4 pupils, skating lessons in Grade 5 and youth leadership training for those in Grade 8 and 9.

Increased assistance for low-income families. Subsidies would be on a means-tested basis. Elimination of 20 "priority centres" that now offer free programs in selected poor neighbourhoods. *Jennifer Lewington*

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