



NORFOLK MINOR HOCKEY ASSOCIATION

SERIOUS ICE SHORTAGE CONCERNS - DISCUSSION PAPER

JUNE 2020

The Norfolk Minor Hockey Association (*NMHA*) is busy planning for our inaugural 2020-2021 hockey season, set to begin this September. Part of this exercise involves scheduling of games, practices, development training (for players and coaches), and of course tournaments. Our objective has always been to provide an 'improved hockey program' to the youth of Norfolk County. The NMHA is proud of the 'A' centre designation that has been granted to us by the Ontario Minor Hockey Association (OMHA). To respectfully represent itself amongst its competitor 'A' centres, the NMHA committed to providing players with access to more development opportunities and a broader range competitive play. Our efforts also serve to improve the utilization of our arenas, as our inaugural programming plan shows an increased demand for ice. Meeting this demand is critical to the success of the NMHA.

NMHA understands the need to be financially responsible and to optimize the use of our community facilities that support our programs. NMHA is aware of budget pressures facing our County and the need to respond to this with real solutions that serve to remedy this while continuing to meet the needs of the user groups that depend on municipally-provided facilities.

The NMHA is aware of the Norfolk Council decision to close the Simcoe Recreation Centre Arena (the "Rec Centre"). The ramifications of this decision have recently become clear through working with Norfolk County in completing a scheduling exercise for the upcoming 2020/2021 hockey season. In short, closing the Rec Centre is a very serious problem which threatens the immediate and long-term success of Norfolk County's hockey programs.



A reconsideration of Norfolk County's resolution is vital in order to remove the threat to Norfolk's hockey programs, and to allow all parties the necessary time to collaborate and find a better path forward. A path that reduces our arenas' reliance on tax-levy funding while at the same time ensuring those selected options foster improved utilization and, most importantly, growth in the programs offered by the major user groups who operate within these arenas.

We believe the reasons to reconsider the 2020 Budget decision to close the Rec Centre are overwhelmingly convincing. Beyond the manner in which the original decision was made and the information it was based on, there have been material changes in circumstances since budget time which demand a re-analysis of the Rec Centre decision. The decision on this matter was purely a budget decision and one that lacked in consultation with the users of the facilities. We've tried to look beyond this and see if we can work with the loss of this ice centre. We've determined that we cannot. We trust that had you known that the budget decision would have this impact, you would have taken the time to explore other options to solve our financial problems. We respectfully request reconsideration of the Rec Centre arena closure and to allow us to work with the County on real options that work to solve the problem without creating others.

Below, we offer our perspective on how we arrived in this situation, and where we must go from here.

NORFOLK COUNTY 2020 BUDGET

Local hockey associations, amongst many others, were completely taken by surprise by Norfolk County's 2020 Budget decision to close the Rec Centre arena. As major stakeholders, the local minor hockey associations were shocked that we were not consulted before this decision was made, and further dismayed that at no time were we made aware of any significant concerns regarding the ongoing operation of Norfolk County's arenas. At no time were there ever any



discussions or negotiations regarding the operations of the arenas, or our ice rental contract terms. We simply accepted the ice rental rates, the ice rental cancellation policies, and all other terms of arena use as set out by Norfolk County.

In addition to not being consulted beforehand, we were also not privy to Norfolk County staff's recommendations and reasoning for closing the Rec Centre, or Council's consideration thereof. It was only suggested after the decision was made that it was a result of Norfolk County's difficult financial circumstances and what was viewed as the significant net levy afforded arena operations in Norfolk. We trust that while you were lead to believe that this option would assist in addressing the financial position of the County, we can only assume your decision was also influenced by suggestions that there would still be sufficient ice available at the remaining facilities to address the needs of its users. We, now having spent time in an attempt to validate this assumption, advise you now that this is NOT the case.

Significant decisions of this nature, impacting a facility constructed through the efforts and support of many local service groups and used by so many Norfolk residents, must be fully informed decisions. This means sufficient due diligence must be performed and all reasonably available information must be gathered. Unfortunately, we don't see how this could have possibly been done without consulting the primary user groups. Would the main user groups pay more? Would they agree to different terms? Did they see any prospect of their ice utilization changing in the near future? These are all questions that would garner critical information if asked. Sadly, they were not. This brings into serious question whether or not the decision to close the Rec Centre was truly informed. It is our firm opinion that it was NOT.

While our greatest concern was with the possible impact on ice availability for our programs, minor hockey associations typically do not have the luxury of seeing all arena bookings. As such, the totality of available ice was not known to individual associations. Nonetheless, Norfolk County expressed confidence that there would be sufficient ice available at the five remaining arenas to satisfy our needs.



NORFOLK MINOR HOCKEY ASSOCIATION

Beginning with the upcoming 2020-2021 hockey season, the new Norfolk Minor Hockey Association will oversee hockey programming for 750+ minor hockey players and offer “A” representative hockey in Norfolk County.

The efforts to bring the Norfolk Minor Hockey Association to fruition began many years ago. The vision was to bring together all five of Norfolk County’s minor hockey associations to grow our community-based hockey programming. While in the end only three associations agreed to participate, being Port Dover, Simcoe and Waterford, this collaboration is enough to significantly improve our hockey programming, talent and opportunities within Norfolk.

With the introduction of Norfolk Minor Hockey, we will attract new players, retain players longer, and provide a greater range of competitive and recreational hockey here in Norfolk County. As a result of these changes, we will see an increase in utilization of local arenas starting in September 2020.

The creation of the Norfolk Minor Hockey Association was approved by the Ontario Minor Hockey Association on January 29, 2020.

The impact of Norfolk Minor Hockey on minor hockey ice requirements is detailed below.

ICE REQUIREMENTS

To best consider our hockey associations’ ice requirements for East Norfolk arenas, the Norfolk, Port Dover, Waterford, Simcoe and Norfolk Hurricanes hockey associations worked together to aggregate our anticipated ice requirements for the 2020-2021 season. These requirements were provided to Norfolk County staff in early May 2020.



It was determined that the above hockey associations will require 163 hours of ice per week. By comparison, these same associations utilized 124 hours of ice per week last year.

To put it in perspective, the creation of Norfolk Minor Hockey increased our combined ice requirements by almost 40 hours per week. This increase represents about a full business weeks' worth of ice – every week.

This increase is due to the anticipated change in team structures and inbound players resulting from the creation of Norfolk Minor Hockey. Further, players of "A" centre teams have a greater need for ice due to increased weekly practice time and additional player development sessions. This is required to satisfy the programming expectations of these players, and to ensure that our program is comparable to, and competitive with, those programs offered by other "A" hockey centres.

With minor hockey being the most significant user of ice, it is also relevant to note that with the closing of the Rec Centre, "East Norfolk" would be reduced from 4 arenas to 3 arenas. With the creation of Norfolk Minor Hockey our combined "East Norfolk" minor hockey needs have increased by a factor of approximately 4/3 (163 hours / 124 hours). The resulting arena requirements to accommodate this change are fairly proportional to this.

Upon review of our ice requirements and arena availability, Norfolk County staff agreed that without the Rec Centre there is not enough ice to satisfy our needs. This is the case even if we found a way to use every single hour of ice available, outside of school hours, at every Norfolk arena. There is simply not enough ice.

Norfolk County shared a tentative ice schedule for all five Norfolk arenas with our associations, thereby providing us with even further insight into what time slots were being made available to minor hockey. This analysis revealed even more serious scheduling issues. Contrary to the ice times made available to us and which we were told were 'usable hours', it is a reality that it is not



possible to use every single hour of ice outside of school hours due to the need to respect local bus times. There are also limited usable back-to-back ice slots which are required for referee scheduling and games which cannot be curfewed. We further see that minor hockey has lost its traditional ice times at Talbot Gardens on Tuesday and Wednesday nights due to displacement of adult leagues from the Rec Centre closure. Finally, the particular days when blocks of ice are made available makes scheduling particularly challenging as significant time is being made available on weekends, however there is a limit to its usefulness as we cannot book practices and games on the same day for the same team.

Our analysis was completed and reviewed by representatives of Norfolk, Port Dover, Simcoe and Waterford minor hockey association executives with significant experience in ice scheduling. All concur with the results and are frightened by the repercussions.

HOCKEY PROGRAMMING CONSEQUENCES

Our current ice availability analysis has concluded that the following consequences will be realized as a result of the closure of the Rec Centre:

- 1) Norfolk Hockey is unable to schedule the practice ice requirements to accommodate “A” level hockey. Our competitive teams would have notably less practice time compared to typical ‘A’ centre operations. This will significantly disadvantage teams/players;
- 2) There is no ice available for player development for any of the Norfolk, Port Dover, Simcoe or Waterford hockey associations. We note that a failure to provide development ice would be a reduction of our programming from last year, when all three local minor hockey associations offered at least 15 hours of development ice for all players;
- 3) **NO TOURNAMENTS!!!** Tournaments represent a large source of incremental revenue, not just for the various minor hockey associations, but for Norfolk County as a whole. Tournaments generate hundreds of hours of additional ice rentals, area hotel bookings, restaurants reservations and additional economic activity. Some of our tournaments



attract up to 1000 visitors who spend time and money in Norfolk County between games. In the past, we would simply cancel regular hockey programming and reschedule those games and practices to available ice slots already available, or request additional ice slots from Norfolk County. However, without the Rec Centre, there simply are no additional ice opportunities. Games and practices cancelled for tournaments could not be rescheduled. As such, we do not see an opportunity for Norfolk, Port Dover, Simcoe or Waterford minor hockey associations to host tournaments;

- 4) There is no room, and therefore no opportunity, for any sort of expanded programming, teams, associations or events;
- 5) The hockey game schedule is completely maximized. There is no room for cancellations or rescheduling – an unavoidable reality of minor hockey - as there is no unused ice;
- 6) There is no ice availability for Select or AE teams in any division other than Midget AE. This would be a significant loss because a key tenant of establishing Norfolk Minor Hockey is to ensure that every player is playing with like-skilled teammates. This maximizes player development and enjoyment of the game. When these are maximized, children stay in sport. If Select or AE teams cannot be offered due to lack of ice, players will end up playing at a level below their skill level, which compromises their skill development and enjoyment of the game, as well as that of their teammates. The most significant impact of not providing a range of hockey program – is the withdrawal of players from the sport;
- 7) Norfolk Hockey’s Major Novice, Major Peewee, Major Bantam, Minor Midget and Midget AE teams are all short of regular ice time;
- 8) After Christmas the OMHA “playdowns” commence (the provincial playoffs). At this point we will be in even more trouble than already identified above. This is because at that time we will be required to schedule playdown series in addition to regular season games and practices for 11 representative teams. Each series will require multiple games (more than one hour each) for each series. There is no flexibility in the available ice to slot these



games, and cancelling and rescheduling other events isn't possible as there is nowhere for such events to go. To put this into perspective, round one of the playdowns will require us to accommodate up to 25 extra hours of game ice. If our teams are successful, the problems continue well into February and March.

We believe the above represents a completely unworkable and unacceptable situation. We are unaware of any other youth hockey program that has been placed in a similar situation by their municipality. It is inconceivable that a hockey program could properly function under these circumstances.

It is worth noting that the closing of the Rec Centre arena would have presented severe scheduling challenges even without the creation of Norfolk Minor Hockey. Simcoe Minor Hockey would have the most difficulty as there is not enough ice in Simcoe to run a rep program. The challenges would stem from the same reasons cited above – notably that available ice is concentrated on weekends and it is not possible to schedule a team's practices and games on the same day. With the Rec Centre closing, each of our local associations is projected to lose some of their traditional ice allocations to other groups.

First Shift Program

Separate from the specific activities of our associations, many of our members have been involved in supporting the "First Shift" program for many years in both Simcoe and Port Dover. This program, sponsored by Bauer and the National Hockey League Players' Association (NHLPA), offers an inexpensive introduction to hockey for under-10 year-old children. This program sees 30-40 new entrants to hockey each session. Quite often, these players register with our local associations following this program and are responsible for a portion of new players entering the game in Norfolk. The program is so successful that our members have run a "Second Shift"

program for Norfolk County for the past two years to give a further opportunity for these new players to continue their skill development, and further their love of the game, beyond the initial 6-week program.

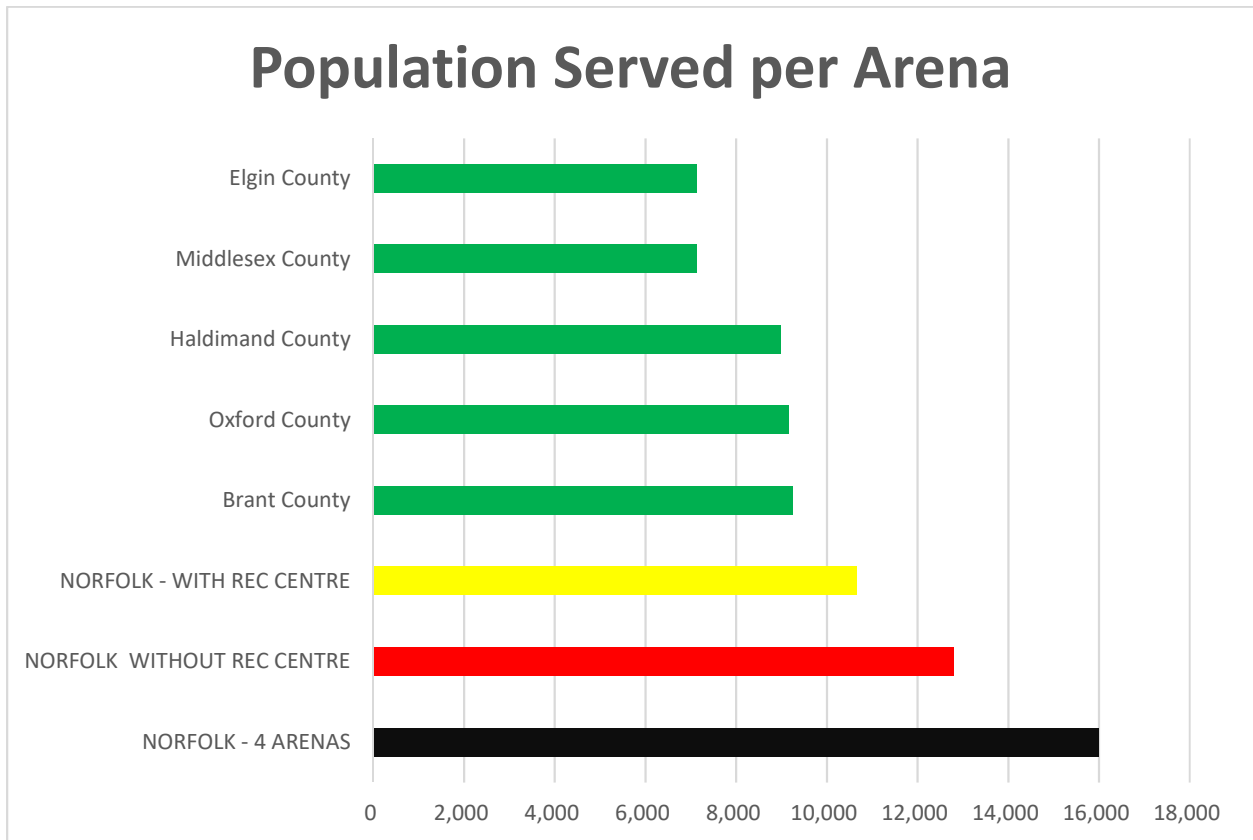


The First Shift program has already received applications for its fall and winter sessions. Sadly, with the closing of the Rec Centre we will be unable to host these events in Port Dover, Simcoe or Waterford. This is a tragic example of how closing the Rec Centre would impact Norfolk's most vulnerable children.

SHOULD FIVE (OR DARE WE SAY 4) ARENAS BE ENOUGH?

Norfolk County has provided no analysis to support the assertion that five arenas are sufficient to accommodate Norfolk's ice needs. Norfolk County's previous Parks and Recreation studies showed that six (6) arenas were sufficient in meeting the demands of the user groups at the time of those studies. In fact, these studies indicated a level of under-utilization and indicated an availability of ice. We purport to you, that the NMHA intends to make use of our underutilized rinks – however to do so – the rink must remain. These studies resolved that if Norfolk were to contemplate a HUB that contained a dual ice pad (as is the common practice these days), such a choice would necessitate the closure of the equivalent single ice pads (i.e. build a dual facility; close two (2) single pad facilities). These same reports contained NO suggestion that Norfolk should simply close an arena. We suspect that while there were grounds for efforts to improve utilization, there we perhaps no grounds for removal of an arena most likely because utilization (while low) was simply not low enough to draw this conclusion.

To provide some perspective on whether the above ice challenges should be anticipated, we surveyed the population base served per arena in nearby southern Ontario rural counties. The following graph illustrates the results:



Amongst Elgin, Middlesex, Haldimand, Oxford and Brant Counties, the average population-per arena ratio is 8,342 residents. The population-per-arena ratio ranges from a low of 7,143 (Elgin) to 9,250 (Brant). By comparison, with the Rec Centre open, each Norfolk arena would be serving an average of 10,667 residents. Without the Rec Centre, the remaining five arenas would be tasked with serving 12,800 residents. At four arenas, a scenario envisioned under Council’s 2020 Budget motion (below), each arena would be tasked with serving an incomprehensible 16,000 residents.

From the above comparisons, it should not be a surprise that Norfolk County requires the Rec Centre to adequately serve the facility needs of Norfolk residents. Even with the Rec Centre, the average Norfolk arena is serving a greater population base than any of our nearby municipalities. Without the Rec Centre, each Norfolk arena would be tasked with accommodating the needs of



53% more residents than the average arena of comparable municipalities. At four arenas, this jumps to 92% more residents. We cannot understand how this eventuality was possibly considered and approved.

We are reminded that Council's Budget decision was as follows:

Option 5. Hockey Arena Consolidation

THAT staff issue RFP's for each arena to seek private or community operators;

AND THAT staff report upon the RFP's by the end of June 2020;

AND THAT Simcoe Recreation Centre ice be removed and that summer ice be provided at the Waterford arena;

AND THAT the Seniors Centre at Pond Street be declared surplus to municipal needs;

AND THAT if successful proponents for the RFP's do not come forward, Norfolk County will proceed to close a further arena in September of 2020.

We are aware that Norfolk Council is proceeding with the RFP and/or Expression of Interest (if you will). The Council resolution also set out that, if you do not receive any interest you will proceed to close a further arena in September of 2020. This resolution is very clear in its intent. If your intentions are different than this, we further encourage the reconsideration of this approved motion to remove this as an action until we (collectively) have our opportunity to work collaboratively on solutions that your community prefers.

We are further mindful of the fact that with the recent HUB Application, Norfolk County correctly predicted increased arena utilization and stated that there is firm support for Norfolk County hockey programs. The submission was bang-on with these assertions, which underpinned Norfolk County's request for funding towards a facility that included a new twin-pad arena. Further, the Hub Application process was transparent and collaborative, was years in the making, and involved robust community engagement, including town halls sessions, surveys, and the creation of a community-member led Recreational Facilities Advisory Board. How Norfolk County could be so progressive in both process and proposal in this instance, and then so soon thereafter pass a motion, with all discussion being held in closed session, to close one arena and put the



wheels in motion to close a second arena, seemingly damn the devastating consequences to Norfolk's youth recreational programs, is incomprehensible.

The Rec Centre, and all existing arenas, are clearly needed in our humble and justified opinion. Without the Rec Centre, Norfolk County cannot accommodate the recreational needs of our population – and our youth in particular.

DO NORFOLK ARENAS COST TOO MUCH?

Municipal arenas do not make money. Despite all the ice time fees paid by minor hockey associations and other users, arenas require a net levy from municipalities.

Do Norfolk County's arenas cost more than arenas of comparable municipalities? Norfolk County has not shown such an analysis. But simply closing arenas because they cost money is not an acceptable decision. Arenas provide our community with tremendous social benefit and represent an infrastructure investment expected by the community. If we don't provide the necessary arenas for reasonable recreational programming, not only will existing Norfolk County residents suffer, but we will not attract future growth.

That said, we recognize that the closing of the Rec Centre was the result, in part, of significant budgeting concerns of Norfolk County. With its 2020 Budget, Norfolk County was looking to "right-size" expenses. But were Norfolk arenas, in particular, "wrong-sized"? Norfolk Minor Hockey is more than willing to be a constructive participant in analyzing the net operational costs

of our arenas and to help determine if they are out of line, or if the required net levy can be reduced regardless.

The introduction of Norfolk Minor Hockey is already a great step in this direction, requiring significantly more ice time rentals and therefore providing new and additional revenue to Norfolk County. Beyond this, are ice rental fees too low? Do they need to be increased over time? Do ice rental cancellation policies need to be adjusted? Has a concerted effort been made to allow



for advertising both in/out of the arena and on the ice itself? Are there other policies that could help bring Norfolk County's net arena levy into an acceptable range? We are eager to help discover these solutions.

COVID-19 IMPLICATIONS

Hockey Canada and the Ontario Hockey Federation have each released their Return to Hockey guidelines. While progress is being made in the Covid-19 battle, it is still unclear what hockey programming will look like when the season starts in September. That said, it is a strong priority to return children to the ice in a safe way, in whatever form that hockey programming takes.

Depending on the safety protocols in place, the 2020-2021 hockey season may look quite unique. Such adjustments may very well put even more pressure on ice time requirements (extra time required between games, maximum number of players on the ice, etc). While such changes will likely impact all hockey centres, hockey programming in Norfolk would be under even more extreme pressure if we start under circumstances where we already do not have adequate ice availability.

Finally, the Port Dover arena is currently being used as a Covid-19 hospital overflow centre. We are not aware of the September plans with this facility, or if we are assured to have the ice available for use at that time.

Beyond the significant concerns and challenges to our hockey programs of not having the Rec Centre, as outlined above, the Covid-related uncertainties provide all the more reason why maintaining the Rec Centre ice is critical at this time.

The Covid-19 situation and its possible impact on hockey programming is also one which could not possibly have been known or expected by Norfolk County at the time of its budget deliberations. This factor has the potential to seriously increase the total ice required by users to accommodate Covid-adjusted programming. As with many services and facilities provided by Norfolk County, ice availability needs to be re-considered in light of these changing circumstances.



SIMCOE SENIORS CENTRE

Norfolk Minor Hockey realizes that the closing of the Rec Centre arena is also tied to the move of the Simcoe Senior's Centre. However, it is also our understanding that the plans for the Simcoe Senior's Centre do not include using the arena dressing rooms, and the primary use of the main arena floor is for a walking track. We find this alarming considering Norfolk County already has an indoor walking program in the Aud. If the use of the Aud for a walking track can continue, we do not see why accommodation can't be made for the Simcoe Senior's Centre to move to the Rec Centre with the continuance of regular arena operations.

We also question if it is reasonable to expect the Simcoe Senior's Centre to resume regular activities any time soon in light of Covid-19 protocols and programming restrictions. Perhaps Haldimand-Norfolk's Medical Officer of Health can be consulted on whether the Simcoe Senior's Centre use of the Rec Centre during the 2020-2021 season is a reasonable prospect at all.

If the trade-off is between the walking track being re-located to the Aud, or the lights being turned on in an otherwise dark facility, we believe maintaining the Rec Centre arena and providing social and physical activity to Norfolk's children should be Norfolk Council's priority.

CONCLUSION

We respectfully request the re-consideration of the decision to close the Rec Centre arena and the decision to close another Norfolk County arena should the RFP/Expression of Interest fail to yield a successful proponent.

The Norfolk Minor Hockey Association, along with our partner minor hockey associations, strongly believe that closing the Rec Centre puts our hockey programs in dire straits, and severely threatens the exciting and expanded hockey programming we are bringing to Norfolk County.

We are more than willing to work with Norfolk County to ensure our arenas are operating in a sustainable and fiscally responsible manner. It is critical that they do so. It is also imperative that



the Rec Centre arena stay in operation, particularly in light of the new realities that have emerged since Norfolk County's 2020 Budget.

We accept that there are challenges, but we are also confident that solutions can be found. However, Norfolk County has to WANT to find the solutions, and to engage users to do so. In the end, we are partners in our communities and partners in the arena facilities. There is no doubt we can work together, engage, and make this work. This is not a bridge too far.

In the meantime, while we endeavor to find a workable and sustainable path forward, we strongly request that you allow the Rec Centre arena to remain in operation, and to serve our children at a time when they need such activity the most.

Sincerely,

Martin Jefferson
President

Pat Meahan
1st Vice President

Darnell Lambert
2nd Vice President