

Field Permit Meeting

May 12, 2012, 1-3pm
Agricola Lutheran Church
25 Old York Mills Road
(Yonge & York Mills)

MEETING SUMMARY

On May 12, 2012 approximately 20 people attended the meeting on Field Permit Fees hosted by the Toronto Sports Council. Participants represented sport groups from across the City of Toronto. The purpose of this forum was to develop advice in response to City Council's request that the Toronto Sports Council and permit fee holders be consulted on solutions to issues raised by the proposed implementation of new field permit fees for children and youth. **Following remarks from Karen Pitre (Chair, Toronto Sports Council)** participants were asked to provide advice on the following:

1. Quality of fields
2. Permit issues around rain out and block bookings
3. Consultation process
4. Introduction of fees

Key messages from feedback received during the meeting are summarized below. This summary was written by Nicole Swerhun, part of the independent facilitation team that helped run the meeting. It was subject to review by participants prior to being finalized.

What advice does the sport community have for the City regarding how to address issues raised by the proposed implementation of new field permit fees for children and youth?

1. FIELD ISSUES

What is the appropriate classification for fields? How can we achieve this appropriate classification of fields?

- a) **It is critical that there is a common understanding of what criteria are used to determine whether a field is A, B, or C** (i.e. Is it the lights? Geography? Maintenance? Other?) – right now we don't have this common understanding. We also need a baseline for agreeing on what baseline on where fields are now. Our advice is that the City use the guidelines provided by Provincial Sport Organizations to support the field classification process.
- b) **It's important that the City continue to include the level of maintenance when setting the classification of fields.** Also our advice is that the City recognize that maintenance is more than how grass is cut – it also includes manicuring infields, getting rid of holes, etc. On a day-to-day basis, our advice is that the City create a checklist that each group can use to review "what needs to be done before we can play".
- c) **The City needs to recognize that right now at many fields it is the primary permit holder that makes a significant contribution to maintaining the fields, which includes investing their money.** If permits continue based on field classifications that include maintenance, it would make sense that once the field drops below the standard required for the classification it would then be up to City to bring it up to standard.



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- d) **Our advice is that the City work with the permit holders to conduct a pre-season and/or post season audit of each facility.** The permit holders would have a greater comfort level in the results of this work if their volunteers are involved in the audit process. The audit should include identification of maintenance and capital issues, and following the audit our advice is that a plan be developed to ensure that required annual/seasonal maintenance and capital investments are made. This could be a 1 year plan or it could be 3 year plan – the City should then negotiate with the volunteer sport organizations to confirm who-does-what to implement the plan (i.e., City does what? Leagues will do what?).

What's your advice on how to improve the fields?

- e) **Different departments at the City need to work together more to help support fields** (e.g. grass cutting, transportation staff help get equipment to fields to improve maintenance). Also City staff need to be trained to complete the maintenance properly (e.g. cutting infield grass different than cutting outfield grass). We suggest that the City consider creating specialized crews that know the different sports and go around the City using those skills. Right now the only experts are from the sport community. It's also important to recognize that at certain fields there are days when City staff don't work, and as a result there is a huge pressure on the volunteer sport groups to do the work (including dragging fields, putting toilet paper in washroom). The City needs a strategy to deal with the gaps that no one is currently filling.
- f) **The City should think about how it can provide consistent level of city support for all similarly classified fields/facilities** – if one A facility has full time staff member, then should be staff at other A facilities.

2. PERMIT ISSUES/BLOCK BOOKING

- a) **Addressing the issue of block booking should not be about dispossessing active users, but instead it should focus on finding excess capacity in the system.** We need to understand there's nothing wrong with block bookings, there's something wrong with people not being able use an empty field.
- b) **It is important to recognize that block booking time happens because permit holders need to protect time for practice and rainout games, and because we want to protect the quality of the facilities we work hard to maintain.** Also the deadline for permit applications happens in the fall, well in advance of registrations (which typically happen in the spring), so the number of permit hours required could go down. That being said, if permit hours are returned, then there's a strong interest in ensuring that the club or league doesn't lose the opportunity to request those hours in the following year (legacy protection).

- c) **It's important that City staff stop making decisions for experienced volunteers regarding when it's appropriate to use the fields.** It would be helpful, however, if there was a mechanism for stopping inexperienced field users from damaging fields (e.g. high schools using fields during the day after rain).
- d) **Permit officers should consider playing a facilitation role when receiving permit requests.** If the requested time is not available, than rather than saying "No, sorry, it's booked", the permit officer should volunteer to try and facilitate connection between permit holder and team that wants to use space. To support this process, the City should consider the value of sending a letter from Parks and Recreation to all permit holders indicated that "we're trying to maximizing access to fields, so please only permit the time you're actually going to use, and be flexible where you can."
- e) **We need to know whether block booking is real issue or not.** Our advice is that the City help us understand what they think the block booking issue is, and the groups being turned away.

3. CONSULTATION PROCESS

- a) **The challenge with this process is that we're looking it as a fees process and it's not – it's about standards, how users will be involved, there's administration.** Until we make progress on these issues we won't be in a position to talk about fees.
- b) **We need a partnership between permit holders and the City to address issues,** and we will not be able to solve all of this for the June 12th report to the Executive Committee. We should be able to begin laying out a process of how we'll work together. Lack of communication causes most problems, and communication is only thing that will solve this problem. One participant suggested that the City implement a community development model - noting that the main components are communication, partnership and cooperation, and that these would represent a major shift from where we've been in past years.
- c) **It's important that this process reach beyond existing clubs and think about how to connect with the many other people and organizations that are interested in using fields.** It is a problem that larger clubs with lots of resources book all the fields and little groups can't access them. We need to address access to new/less established clubs and leagues.
- d) **We need to include in this process a way to ensure new sport and recreation facilities are built in Toronto.** The Toronto Sports Council did a sport framework in 2005 which called for the development of a plan for how the city will get more facilities, more partnerships for better fields, and more fields. We need to address the fact that the City approves the development of so many new condos with no supporting

recreational infrastructure. If we don't find more facilities (need to approach school boards) we'll have a problem.

4. INTRODUCTION OF FEES

- a) **We're not in position to say if fees are good or bad because we don't know what they're for.** The City needs to tell us how much it costs to maintain the facilities we're being charged for before we can discuss fees. It may be that the fees discussion has to be pushed to 2014 until we can address the partnership component. New fees need to come with a clear understanding of the improved services we'll receive in exchange for those fees. Without improved service, this is simply a tax on children and youth using our parks. If that's the case, the fee should be collected from other parks users as well (people using off leash dog areas, the City's trail network, etc.).
- b) **We don't think the City really has a good knowledge of what the volunteers in the sports community do, and if they did, there are a lot of questions here we wouldn't even be asking.** The City needs to have a knowledge and history of what those organizations do financially and for kids in Toronto. Right now the only connection our groups have is with the permit department. There should be some type of liaison person who gets into the community and understands what's happening (or there could be a city staff person who attends some of our meetings to understand what we're faced with).

OVERALL

"We are all here for the same reason – kids playing sports. With a new partnership between the sport community as a whole and the City of Toronto, we can work on long term plans for a partnership that supports existing players and meeting the needs of new players. This is a golden opportunity that's been built out of an adversarial process. Let's take this opportunity to build a partnership and make this a permanent part of the process."