

Campaign Aims to Renovate Lake Forest Ice Rink

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Every once in a while, a city is fortunate enough to get a facility that becomes more than just a building.

Lake Forest seems to have that type of gem in the ice rink at Lake Forest College, called the Alumni Memorial Field House. The rink, which was built in 1950 as a field house, has become an integral part of Lake Forest - on weekends you can see the Lake Forest College Foresters hockey team battle another team on the ice, and the rink serves as home ice for varsity and junior varsity games sponsored by the Lake Forest High School Hockey Association (Scouts Hockey). Adult hockey leagues and college junior varsity and intramural teams use the rink as well, and learn-to-skate programs bring younger residents to the rink.

When you walk into the rink, it's not hard to see why it's such an important asset for Lake Forest. There's the gentle hum of the lights, the energy of the fans cheering in the stands as little kids smile while giving high fives to the players, and the gray-and-white colors accented with the college's colors of red and black create an exhilarating atmosphere.

But the rink is in need of repair. The dasher boards are starting to give; the compressors to make the ice are aging; the lobby, bleachers, locker rooms, restrooms and handicap access need to be upgraded; and there is no heating in the facility.

'Great way'

"I'm excited about the prospect to be able to make the ice rink a nicer and more welcoming place," said Jackie Slaats, athletic director at Lake Forest College. "The partnership between the college and the community is important, and this project is a great way to display that partnership."

The goal, Slaats said, is to raise \$4.5 million for interior renovations of the building, which was converted into an ice rink in 1969. The college plans to raise \$2.25 million with the help of alumni, parents and fans, and the Lake Forest High School Hockey Association (Scouts Hockey) plans to raise \$1 million through the Home Ice Advantage Campaign. Slaats said she hopes local residents, businesses and organizations will help with the remainder of the cost for the project.

Renovations will include a new playing surface and subsurface, updated locker rooms (one designated for the Scouts), new stands that will seat up to 500 fans, a revamped lobby complete with trophy cases, wall plaques and a concession stand, and improved restrooms. Those improvements will be made when funds become available, Slaats said.

The Lake Forest Parks and Recreation Department uses the facility for learn-to-skate and introduction to hockey classes, its free skate program and its winter carnival, said Mary Van Arsdale, director of parks and recreation.

'Worth saving'

"I really think that for those who enjoy winter sports, this is a great facility to offer those activities," Van Arsdale said. "The rink is unique and worth saving."

Adam Love plays left-wing forward for the Foresters and said he loves playing at the college's rink, but it needs some work. Love came from Ontario, Canada, to play at Lake Forest, so he's thrilled the college and community are stepping forward to better the rink.

"It means a lot to have a nice facility so more people will come and watch the games, and it will attract more students to come here," he said. "I think it's huge that the community is helping out because they should use it as much as we do."

Nancy Donovan's son, J.P., is a sophomore at Lake Forest High School and plays hockey for the Scouts. Although the family is moving next year, Donovan still wanted to give back and lead the Scouts campaign to renovate the ice rink. The Lake Forest High School Hockey Associations' board created a steering committee for the campaign, and Donovan is co-chair of that committee.

"I spent many a cold night in that hockey arena - it is falling apart," Donovan said. "When we moved here 20 years ago, my kids were the beneficiaries of all the wonderful things Lake Forest has to offer. (There were many) generous families before us who donated land and funded facilities, and we want to continue that wonderful tradition."

Donovan was on the Lake Forest College board for nine years and is still on the investment committee, so she knows how much the rink means to the college and city.

Fred Bartuch is president of the Lake Forest High School Hockey Association's board and said saving the rink is crucial for Scouts Hockey.

"Frankly it means a lot because if that rink isn't available, we have to look elsewhere, and there aren't that many options nearby," he said. "It would mean more of a commute and more expenses, and we want to have a home in Lake Forest."

Bartuch has two sons who play for the Scouts, and a third who plans to join the team next year. Although his sons most likely won't see the benefits of the Home Ice Advantage Campaign, he knows how important it is.

"This is not an easy thing to do, especially given the economy," he said. "We're hoping to raise a lot of money and that this gets done, but it will only get done if parents and the community get involved and help out."

Steve Hurst is co-chair of the steering committee and said he hopes the campaign will increase awareness of the ice rink.

"Our hope is that we get a rink that our teams will be proud to play in, that will draw fans to our games and that will continue to be available to support community skating programs here in Lake Forest," Hurst said. "We want residents to be aware that there's this asset at Lake Forest College that's been part of our community for a very long time. We are at risk of losing it, and if we do we will not be able to replace it."