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New skating rink is risky proposition

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BEVERLY - A businessman who hopes to build the North Shore's first new skating rink in 20 years admits the project is an economic risk but says public demand is too strong to overlook.

"These rinks are pie-in-the-sky to a certain degree," said Peter Petri, a Wenham resident who has formed a group interested in building a rink. "But it's the right thing to do for this area. We've been in contact with all the programs. They're hungry for ice."

Mayor Bill Scanlon announced last week that he will soon seek proposals from developers who want to build a rink on city-owned land near Beverly Airport. Petri said yesterday that his organization, Innovative Sports Group, will submit a bid. He estimated the cost of building a new rink at \$4 million to \$8 million.

Rink managers and hockey enthusiasts say another rink is sorely needed. Hockey teams practice as early as 5 in the morning and as late as 11 at night due to the lack of available ice time at the three local rinks in Salem, Peabody and Hamilton.

But in the rink business, a clamoring clientele doesn't necessarily translate into economic success. The demand is high in the winter and during after-school hours, but rinks are often empty during the day and in the summer. Energy and insurance costs are also high, according to rink managers.

"You hear all this talk (about building a rink), but once they really research it, they find out they're not going to get rich overnight," said Dean DeCoste, manager of the Johnson Rink at the Pingree School in Hamilton.

Petri, who runs a financial brokerage firm, said his group understands the risks but is willing to take a chance. Demand has increased in part due to an increase in the number of girls playing hockey, he said. Endicott College in Beverly also recently formed a hockey team and is looking for a place to play.

"We would in two days' time be able to book every single sheet of ice for the whole season," he said.

Petri said he started forming his group two years ago with the intention of building a rink and has two financial partners. He said he has also contacted the Boston Bruins to see if the National Hockey League would be interested in investing in the project.

The rink, which would probably have two sheets of ice, would be built next to two new city-owned soccer fields planned for the former Vitale fly ash dump. Petri is hoping the addition of a skating rink would turn the area into a sports complex and community center.

Petri runs a youth hockey program called the Junior Raiders as well as the Hamilton-Wenham middle school hockey program. He lives less than a mile from the proposed rink site near Beverly Airport and has four children of his own who play hockey.

"I've got kids who are going to be doing this for the next 10 years," he said. "It's something I love."

Skating rinks sprung up all over the North Shore in the 1970s when Bobby Orr and the Boston Bruins sparked a boom in youth hockey programs. But the rinks started going out of business when youth hockey participation leveled off and the private operators could no longer afford the high energy and insurance costs. Rinks in Danvers, Beverly, Lynn, Wenham and Essex all closed.

The local rinks now in operation - Pingree's Johnson Rink, Salem State College's Rockett Arena and the McVann-O'Keefe Rink in Peabody - are run by schools or, in the case of McVann-O'Keefe, the city.

DeCoste, the Johnson Rink manager, said it is more difficult for a private owner to succeed in the rink business. The Johnson Rink was the last one built on the North Shore, in 1987.

"We're nonprofit," he said. "It's a good business for a school or somebody who doesn't pay taxes."

Scanlon, who first brought up the idea of a skating rink in 1999, said he understands the shaky history of rinks in the area. But he said the private developer, not the city, would assume all of the risks. The city would make money through rent and property taxes paid by the developer, but the city would not pay any costs for building or operating the rink, he said. He said about a "half-dozen parties" have expressed interest in submitting a bid.

The mayor's interest in skating rinks goes beyond taxes and lease payments. He played hockey at Boston Latin High School and at MIT. At age 66, he still plays organized hockey, although he's been slowed lately by a shoulder injury.

Scanlon recalled the days when he lived in Canada and had to get up early in the morning to take his son to hockey practice. He said he's heard similar stories from people around the North Shore for years.

"They can't get decent ice time," he said. "The demand is there."

