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Backers of girls hockey make pitch at Ken-Ton

Ways discussed to initially get around financial obstacles to setting up league

By Janice L. Habuda and Harold McNeil
NEWS STAFF REPORTERS

Even as local school districts grapple with potential funding cuts that could endanger existing programs, a group of parents continues to lobby for the addition of girls ice hockey to varsity sports.

William Pavone, whose daughter is a freshman at Kenmore West High School, made his second appearance Tuesday night before the Kenmore- Town of Tonawanda School Board. He is part of Girls 4 Varsity Ice Hockey, made up of parents from several school districts.

Since Pavone first appealed to the School Board last fall, a committee of athletic directors from several districts — including Ken-Ton — met to discuss the possibility of starting a regional league. Only Nichols School, a private school in Buffalo, currently sponsors a girls team.

Pavone, who is on the board of the Great Lakes Girls Hockey League, suggested measures to reduce the costs of such a program.

Simultaneously, a group of parents and their high school-age daughters in the Williamsville School District Tuesday made a similar appeal to the School Board there.

“In most regards, Williamsville is well above other school districts in their opportunities provided to girls, but when you look at the winter season, you’ll see that there is a significant discrepancy in the opportunities available to boys and girls,” said Helen Drew-Meosky, whose daughter, Nell has played ice hockey for eight years.

A junior at Williamsville East, Nell Meosky, played two years of girls house-league hockey before going on to play in the boys league to help develop her skills, until she became too old and the boys became too big for her to play in their league.

She, Paige Pautler, a junior at Williamsville East; and Alicia Oswald, a junior at Williamsville South, noted that

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next year will be the last year they would be able to participate in a girls varsity ice hockey program in the district.

“I would love to be out there playing for my school,” Paige said .

Her father, Michael Pautler, is the girls hockey coordinator for Amherst youth hockey and oversee three travel teams and six house-league teams of girls only hockey.

“Our girls program is the largest overall program in all of upstate New York. The ages of our girls ranges from 8 to 17 [years old]. We have over 150 girls in this program alone and approximately 20 more who play in the boy’s program,” Pautler said.

“Our girls program continues to grow every year. From the last season to the current season, we grew 25 percent alone and project higher growth rates next year. My position is that the time for girls varsity ice hockey is now. There is the interest. There are the numbers, and we need to make it happen,” he added.

Previously, the superintendent of the Williamsville Central School District mentioned a figure of \$26,350 to support a team in 2009-10. That amount includes the costs of coaching stipends, practice and game ice time, officiating, uniforms and transportation for that district.

The proposed program was still included in the superintendent’s 2009-10 budget development package among programs that are considered “major impact items” that would be considered vital for enhancing the district’s program offerings.

“Rules . . . allow the combining of schools and districts, if need be for a few years, to get a new emerging sport off the ground,” Pavone said. “This also lowers a district’s contribution initially.”

“There also would be plenty of volunteer coaches, managers and others willing to help out if the district would allow,” Pavone said.

“Perhaps a parent booster group can be formed to fundraise and help pay a portion of the costs to get it started,” he added.

After Pavone spoke during the public comments period of the Ken-Ton School Board meeting, neither board members nor administrators responded.

But there was a reference to sports programs, in general, as School Superintendent Mark P. Mondanaro updated the board about ongoing financial challenges in developing a budget for the 2009-10 school year. The very varsity programs recognized earlier in the evening for their scholar athletes could be threatened by a stagnant tax base, Mondanaro noted.

If any were eliminated, “We think it’s highly doubtful we [would] get them back,” he said.

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