

city leaders move forward with a plan to evaluate the facility's energy usage and long-term needs.

Mayor Paul A. Dyster said the city already has started work to replace a broken door, improve emergency lighting and add fire extinguishers and a kitchen fire suppression system in the buildings.

"The judgment was that these were things that simply could not wait to be done," Dyster said. "Even if at some point you do have some redesign of the facility, you could move the fire extinguishers and safety lights. It's not that we'd lose the investment in that stuff."

The health and safety repairs will be done while city officials seek qualifications this month from private consultants who could review operations at the facility and suggest ways to improve the two rinks.

Dyster said during a meeting last month that the city could like to renovate the two indoor ice rinks before the 2010-2011 World Junior Hockey Championships come to HSBC Arena in Buffalo and Dwyer Arena at Niagara University.

"There's been a lot of discussion about uses of other hockey facilities,"

Dyster said. "We're going to try to fast track this and see what we can get done in time for our facility to participate in events surrounding the tournament."

City officials have been discussing potential upgrades to the two indoor ice rinks since last spring.

Long-term upgrades will likely also include improving energy efficiency measures and separating utility meters at the ice pavilion from other Hyde Park amenities. That would allow the city to bill the pavilion's private operators, Hugh C. Gee and Anthony Attardo, for the actual cost of utilities for the first time since the rinks were leased out in 2002.

City Councilman Steven D. Fournier has questioned why work to separate the ice pavilion's utilities from other park amenities has never been done.

City records show that power, water and gas in the section of the park that includes the indoor ice rinks cost the city \$314,670 in 2007. That same year, the rink operators paid \$130,788 to the city for lease fees and utility reimbursements.

Because the ice pavilion has never been metered separately from other park facilities, officials have said they do not know whether the city is losing money on utility costs at the indoor ice rinks.

The private rink operators currently pay a monthly utility reimbursement of \$8,000 regardless of the actual cost.

"I'd like to see it separated," Fournier said of the utility costs. "It just doesn't make sense."

Falls leaders last year approved using \$300,000 of a planned \$3.97 million bond issue for improvements at the ice pavilion. Dyster said that money could be used to hire the consultant to study the ice pavilion and also to pay for a portion of the long-term facility upgrades.

The city also has had discussions with Niagara Falls School District officials about potentially partnering to improve the ice rinks, Dyster said.

The two indoor ice rinks were built in the 1970s. They are used primarily by area hockey leagues and teams.

Councilman Charles A. Walker said he wants the city to look closely at what facility repairs should be paid for by the private operators.

"What exactly is our responsibility and their responsibility?" Councilman Charles A. Walker asked. "If we're

talking about expending all this money, are they actually holding up their end of the agreement?"

Thomas O'Donnell, the city's first deputy corporation counsel, told the City Council recently that the city has given the private operators a list of facility repairs for which they are responsible.

"After visiting the facility with the city administrator, we made the call that there are certain things that have to be addressed immediately," Dyster said. "We can decide later on if the city paid for it and it's somebody else's responsibility, we can try to get that straightened out."

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