

Leaside girls may still be shut out of North Toronto rink

February 23, 2010 19:02:00

Robyn Doolittle
City Hall Bureau

The Leaside women's hockey association wanted ice time at North Toronto arena. When they couldn't get it, they went to the media and the mayor's office.

Since then, there have been three months of angry debate and an extensive review of Toronto's eight board-run rinks, culminating in a unanimous vote at Tuesday's city council meeting to change ice allocation practices.

But the Leaside women's league probably still won't be playing at North Toronto next season. In fact, according to Gord Thompson, chair of the arena board, all the recent interference will do is to "make something very simple far more complicated."

The Leaside group is thrilled anyway — though Ron Baker, president of the Toronto Leaside Girls Hockey Association, acknowledges the changes won't guarantee his players access.

"There's going to be a great deal of transparency in this, and that is so important," he said. "We wanted to be treated fairly. Equitably — not better, just equal. And we got that."

As a result of the city hall decision, Baker said the league will probably not proceed with a threatened human rights complaint.

Under the new rules, groups looking for ice time at any Toronto-owned rink — there are 48, including the eight operated by local boards — will apply through one centralized body at city hall. The city will then decide how much ice time that group is proportionally entitled to. Who applies where, and who is given what, will be made public for the first time.

From there, arena boards will receive the applications, and members will set the rink schedule. As long as it meets the city's ice allocation targets — for instance, 60 percent of time must be set aside for youth recreational leagues — the city will approve it. The boards must

adhere to the city's equity policy, which doesn't inherently mean a 50/50 split between boys and girls.

As long as the boards play by the rules, the city is unlikely to interfere.

For the Leaside league, that means they'll be entitled to ice time, but not necessarily at their rink of choice. And given the bitter feelings between them and the North Toronto rink, odds are things won't be changing in the 2010/2011 season.

"We have nothing against or for the Leaside girls' organization. The problem is our rink is full and the people that are there don't even have enough ice for their own needs. There's a terrible ice shortage in Toronto," said Thompson.

Baker said Leaside realizes there are no guarantees about location.

"We're going to get our proportional share. City-wide, we'll be accommodated," he said.

In November, the *Star* highlighted a quickly escalating fight between the Leaside league and the arena board. Mayor David Miller, concerned girls' hockey wasn't being treated fairly, asked the community development and recreation committee to fix the problem.

Two weeks ago, Brenda Patterson, who manages parks and recreation, presented the city with a solution: centralize all ice distribution responsibilities at city hall and cut the boards out of that process almost entirely. But following 10 hours of debate and hearing from dozens of speakers who were furious the city was wresting control away from local boards, council rejected the proposal.

It also voted to make building new ice pads at Leaside Gardens and Don Mills Civitan arena a priority in the 2011 capital budget.

The deal reached at city hall Tuesday, Miller said, was a good compromise that left everyone happy.