

<http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/news/local/scn-sa-rink2dec05,0,4837010.story?coll=stam-news-local-headlines>

Ice rink plan to get further study: City to spend \$40K to \$60K to look at feasibility of expansion

By Donna Porstner
Staff Writer

December 5, 2005

STAMFORD -- The Board of Finance plans to spend \$40,000 to \$60,000 on a long-awaited study to determine whether to expand Terry Connors Ice Rink in Cove Island Park.

The board's Audit Committee is expected to select Firland Management, an ice rink management and consulting firm in North Mankato, Minn., for the job when it meets Thursday night.

"I expect that we'll move forward, we'll choose this vendor and negotiate a good price," board member Tim Abbazia said. "I think it's important to understand if there is a need or not, and whether it will break even or generate a small profit."

The board decided to hire a consultant to assess market demand and prepare revenue projections after Mayor Dannel Malloy put \$5.9 million in his capital budget last spring for the expansion. The board pulled the ice rink funding from the budget with the expectation that the administration would revive the proposal once elected officials had more information.

A preliminary financial analysis prepared by Director of Administration Ben Barnes last year predicted an expanded Terry Connors would make \$23 million in its first 30 years.

Elected officials said they needed independent financial projections before they could support the project. Several officials said they would support it only if increased rink revenue over time paid for the construction.

Some have said they would support a second rink only if it were built elsewhere in the city. Cove residents oppose further development of the park and formed a neighborhood association to fight the project. They fear a second rink would ruin the park's beauty and increase traffic in an already congested neighborhood.

Malloy, whose three sons play hockey, said expanding Terry Connors is the only option. Having two free-standing rinks would require more staff and equipment and would be too expensive, he has said.

Cove residents faced off against hockey parents at a public hearing on the city budget in March. Stamford Youth Hockey parents said a shortage of ice time in Stamford forces them to spend \$70,000 a year on ice time at rinks in Shelton and Rye, N.Y.

Opponents say the only way a second rink could make money is by selling all or most of its prime time to out-of-towners and private groups paying the full market rate. City officials have promised ice time at the new rink would be offered to Stamford youth programs first.

A selection committee interviewed all three bidders, City Purchasing Agent Robert Ruszkowski said. Firland, the highest bidder, was selected because it received rave reviews from former clients, he said.

"There was a lot of reference checking with previous clients and there was not one client that was unhappy with Firland, so that went a long way even though they were more expensive," Ruszkowski said.

MacLaughlin Management Group of Exeter, N.H., bid \$49,250. Rink Management Services Corp. of Mechanicsville, Va., which bills itself as the nation's largest ice rink management company, bid \$13,250. Ruskowski said it was so far below the others that "we weren't sure he could deliver what we were looking for."

Firland officials told the committee they would charge \$40,000 to \$45,000 to assess market demand and profitability and would bill the city the full \$60,000 only if construction is likely and the city needs building estimates.

The city spent \$56,000 on an architectural study last year that looked at ways to expand Terry Conners.

The state reimbursed the city for the first study using a portion of a \$100,000 grant. Grants Director Sandra Dennies said the city cannot tap into the remaining \$44,000 unless the project goes forward. The money may be used only for the design or construction of a second ice surface, she said.

Supporters and opponents are looking forward to the second study, hoping the results will end the controversy that's divided the city for more than a year.

Ken Mulreed of North Stamford, a Stamford Youth Hockey coach whose son plays on the Trinity Catholic High School hockey team, said he's not looking forward to driving his son to weekly 5:20 a.m. practices at Terry Conners. But he said he doesn't mind waiting one more season while the city does more market research and gets revenue projections if that's what it takes to get a second rink built.

"If they are going to spend that much money, you want to know what the return is going to be," he said.

Mulreed said he has no doubt that the consultant's report will favor expansion.

"When they (youth hockey) are buying ice at three different rinks, how can they say there is not a need?" he said.

Charles Stobbie, president of the Cove Neighborhood Association, said a second study is needed to disprove the administration's projections.

"Ice rinks are closing across the country," Stobbie said. "There's no way it's going to make money."

If dual-rink facilities aren't more profitable than Greenwich wouldn't be considering an expansion at the Dorothy Hamill Skating Rink and Bridgeport wouldn't be adding a second surface at its Wonderland of Ice, Malloy said.

The Bridgeport project, which will renovate the existing rink, add a second regulation-size hockey rink and a curling rink, is expected to cost \$5.5 million.

"Bridgeport is adding a second ice rink as we speak. Greenwich is actively contemplating it as we speak, so obviously two other communities say two ice rinks are better than one," Malloy said.

He said he will decide whether to put money for a second rink in next year's capital budget based on interest rates, construction estimates and the revenue projections provided by the consultant. Malloy said he will not decide until the study is complete.

"I don't want to prejudge," Malloy said. "Let's see what it has to say."

He said he won't push the project if residents are still divided at budget time.

"Clearly, there would have to be a consensus in support before it could be built," he said.

Copyright © 2005, Southern Connecticut Newspapers, Inc.