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Sent: Friday, December 13, 2024 9:48 AM
To: Clerks Public
Subject: Written Submission For the OPR Meeting of January 23rd

Executive Summary:

Curling is an iconic Canadian (and Olympic) sport. Although Markham's Recreation Department supports a large number of sports by way of programs and facilities, Curling is not one of them.

It turns out that the private-club model by which the sport has survived, is not suitable in the 21st century. Specifically, the demographic of current participants is aging. But the nature of the private-club model imposes roadblocks for the entry of Youth into the game.

Thus, with an increasing number of seniors leaving the sport, but an insufficient number of young people entering, grass-roots participation is dwindling, and in danger of extinction.

Thus I submit that Markham Recreation should provide public facilities and programs for Curling, in order to encourage entry into the game for the general diverse population, and especially our Youth.

Curling is an iconic Sport in Canada. Organized Curling dates back to 1807 with the formation of the Montreal Curling club. Formal National Championships have been held for almost one hundred years... since 1927 (except for the war years).

In 1998 Curling became an Olympic sport, and Canada has harvested 12 Olympic medals (6 gold) since then...to go along with their 36 World titles for Canadian men since 1959, and 18 World titles for Canadian women since 1979.

Yet, strangely, Curling has never been part of Markham's Recreation Programs.

Markham supports everything from Acrobatics to Yoga with both facilities and programs. Hockey, skating, swimming, even pickle-ball? Yes, of course.

Curling? Nowhere to be seen. It has been left up to private clubs.

But it is a very different world from those heady days of the 1950's and '60's when Curling Clubs flourished and sustained the sport. In spite of success at the Olympic, World, and televised "professional" events in general... Curling grassroots participation is in decline.

In a minute, I will explain why.

In a report prepared for Curling Canada in 2021 ...

<https://www.curling.ca/files/2021/10/Profile-of-the-Canadian-Curler-Winter-2020.docx>
... I was estimated that about 4.4% (1.4 million) curled at least once in the winter... but that less than 400,000 actually curled regularly.

Statistics from the 1950's and 60's are hard to come by, but I can assure you that a much greater proportion of the (albeit smaller) population curled back then, as pretty much every village of more than a few hundred people had a rink.

In the 40-some years that I have been a resident of Markham, at least 8 clubs in the GTA have closed their curling facilities, losing over 50 sheets of ice. This... even as residential populations have increased. Five of those closures occurred since 2018.

The most recent to close Curling ... the Bayview Golf and Country Club ... lies within Markham's borders. This leaves Markham with just one small club in Unionville with 4 sheets of ice. 4 sheets of ice can handle an absolute maximum stretched limit of 600 curlers. 400 to 450 is more realistic and comfortable. Surely there are more than 400 people in this city of 350,000 who might consider participating in the sport if they somehow had a chance.

So why is participation down, and why are Curling clubs closing?

Well, it turns out that the private-club model does not work very well... especially where the private clubs had golf and Curling together. It did not matter much 50 years ago, when expenses were low... but as the years went by, and membership fees ballooned, the difference between the Curlers and golfers became a significant source of political friction. The golf membership of these clubs viewed the Curling facility as an "expense", not as an asset. And even if their financial calculations were faulty... the Golfers usually held the voting shares... so it was not very difficult to vote to shut Curling down.

You may ask: if participation is falling anyway, what does it matter? Why should new facilities open?

Well, here again, the private-club model is the problem.

First of all, the private-club model is intimidating for the average person. The sign on the door says "Members Only". A passerby might be interested in viewing a game live, just to see what it is all about, but they would never enter a private club to do so. Even if a Club readily accepts visitors, a non-curler on the street probably does not know that, and wouldn't think to enter. And although Clubs are trying hard to increase diversity and inclusion, it has been difficult to overcome the stigma of private Curling clubs as being a primarily "white" game.

Most importantly, such a private-club model restricts the entry of young people into the game.... Obviously, they need to LEARN before they can play. But even progressive "public" clubs, such as Unionville, have to take care of members first. With the recent closure of all these GTA clubs, remaining clubs are stretched to their limits, to

accommodate the displaced curlers. Thus “Learn-to-curl” and JUNIOR programs may be limited to something like 5 percent of available ice time or even less. As a result, the Clubs’ demographic is aging and dying off... but there is little or no new generation to replace it. That, of course, is not a sustainable condition.

Today, it is impossible for Individuals to come together to form a “Club” and build a facility like they did in the 1960’s... the costs are just too prohibitive. (There has only been one club built in this area in more than 40 years... King City ... and that was with extensive support from all 3 levels of government.)

Therefore, it is highly unlikely that Markham will EVER have more than the existing 4 sheets of ice to serve their ever-growing population...

...UNLESS the City ... through its Recreation Department ... gets involved in building and operating public Curling facilities, just as they do with Hockey.

Just 4 sheets of Curling ice for a population of 350,000 is tragic. Curling is a healthy no-contact sport that combines skill, strength, and mental agility. It can be played by all ages, from 6 to 96 or more. It can be played by all sexual orientations and ethnic backgrounds. Even wheel-chair-bound disabled persons can participate.

It would be a shame to see Curling disappear at the grass-roots level in Markham, just when it is starting to thrive around the world. Markham could be a leader in rejuvenating it, with public facilities and programs.

Respectfully submitted

Art Leganchuk

