

TOWN OF HIGHLGATE

Highgate Sports Arena Bond Vote Informational Meeting

Minutes from October 29, 2014 @ 7pm

Present were: Steve Bushey, Kim Gates, Jeff Towle, Brian Spears, Karen Gagne Fortin, Chris Yates, Luke Choiniere, Diana O'Hara, Heidi Britch-Valenta, Wendi Dusablon, Tom Racine, Don Gilbert, Henry Rainville, Paulette Tatro, Evangeline LaRocque, Richard Flint, Keith Ploof. This meeting was also filmed by NW Access TV.

The meeting began @ 7pm with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Steve Bushey started off the meeting by stating that over the last 6-7 months there has been an effort to put together another plan for the current ice arean to keep it going and sustain it for the future. Steve is a small piece of the puzzle and he introduced Kim, Paulette and Don who were present to present information and answer questions. Paulette and Kim have been on various committees regarding the arena since March 2010. They have worked through 7+ different scenarios to renovate the arena. This plan being voted on on Novemer 4th is a bare bones plan. Don Gilbert is the president of the facilities board that over sees the operation of the arena – MAHA. Don will later explain some renovations / improvements that have already been done at the facility.

Steve Bushey showed the flyer that was mailed on October 12th to all registered voters (one per household). He went through some of the flyer highlights. To replace the ice system and flooring is \$1,341,000.00, of which \$990,000.00 is being asked of Highgate tax payers. Each taxpayer on a 15 year bond would pay \$24.76 per \$100,000.00 of assessed property value. MAHA has proven financial stability over the last four years. The building is 35+ years old and the ice system is the heart beat of the building.

Kim also went through highlights of the flyer, including a HUD grant for \$196,000.00 that must be used by Septemer, 2015. There is urgency with regard to the grant. Another urgency is that the Freon that we use, supply is being reduced which drives up costs. If we vote on November 4th and it is approved, we can go out to bid and design to be ready for the renovations by March 2015. Henry Rainville asked what are the alternatives to the Freon? Steve has looked into it and he does not know if the old system we have can be converted. The EPA considers Freon 22

to be at the top of the nasty list. It will be totally banned by 2020, and is being phased out now.

Don Gilbert listed renovations that have already been completed at the arena.

MAHA has been managing the facility since 2011 and they have expanded use of the arena to include spring and summer activities.

- Indoor turf was purchased in 2011 for soccer, field hockey, little league, lacrosse and more.
- New sound system installed in 2011.
- Upgraded the heating system in 2012 and switched to natural gas.
- Upgraded some of the locker rooms.
- New flooring in the bathrooms of the locker rooms.
- New dehumidification system installed this year.
- Replaced flooring in the lobby, locker rooms and hallway.
- Replaced benches in the locker rooms.
- Bleachers were reinforced by volunteers from Ben & Jerry's.
- IBM volunteers have also done some great work around the facility.
- Large donation from Sticks & Stuff, which included a new score board, dasher boards and plexi glass. The score board is being used. The boards and glass will be installed once we are able to replace the ice making system.

The total in renovations that has been done over the last four years is \$164,000.00. Paulette added that the building is still owned by the town.

Whether or not the relationship with MAHA continues, the improvements completed benefit the town. If the facility fails to remain an ice facility, that would be unfortunate. Highgate has a lot to offer that other towns do not, because we have this facility here. Highgate would be a much different place without it. It's not just for kids, its for us all. Idle hands can get into mischief, and we are fortunate to engage many people, not just kids, at the Highgate Arena on a regular basis.

Karen Gagne Fortin added that the Highgate School uses the facility often. Right now they are using it for four weeks of physical education. All Highgate kids know how to skate because of this program. Other than Stowe, that makes us very unique. The public library also uses the facility for programming, as well as MVU for field trips, and Swanton has hosted community skates as well. Others use it, but Highgate residents truly benefit from it.

Henry Rainville asked if the \$164,000.00 in improvements have any loans against them. No, they do not. MAHA invested \$128,000.00 into the improvements, \$18,000.00 came from a healthy communities grant, and \$18,000.00 came from the capital donation fund.

November 1st and 2nd there will be free coffee and donuts for Highgate residents at the arena from 8:30am – 10:30am. There will also be a free public skating session from gam – 11:00am on Saturday, November 1st.

Andy King noted that from an economic stand point, we are a small town, and not many things make us a destination town. The arena is our biggest draw and the reason people come here and buy from our stores. That lends a lot of value in itself. Karen added that last week there were teams here from St. Lawrence NY that came to play. Kim is a big public skater and noted that she is amazed to see the generations that come to skate. First time skaters, teenagers, grandparents, and more come to skate together – and eat French fries !

Don added that he has been involved with the arena for a long time. It is the hub of our community. You always know someone at the Highgate arena. Now that programming is expanded, it happens like that all year round. There is a great value to making connections with people.

Jerry (camera man from NW Access TV) stated that people need to decide, where to you want your kids to hang out ? At the park and ride, or here in the center of town at the arena ?

Heidi asked about the high school teams. Paulette noted that if there was no arena here, it would be a huge commitment for families with time, money, food, gas, equipment, and to add a long commute would make it hard to keep an organization together. We would be hard pressed to keep the numbers consistent and growing without a local facility. Transportation costs to travel to a different facility as well as finding ice time would be difficult. Right now Milton youth hockey uses our ice, as well as St. Albans youth hockey. We could not go to St. Albans for ice time, they don't have enough for their own program. We are home ice for MAHA, MVU, Milton youth and St. Albans youth.

Andy asked about the age of the ice system and the monetary loss that could be realized if the bond vote does not pass. It seems there is an urgency of an imminent failure of the ice system if we don't act soon. Steve stated that there is the risk of failure at any time, due to the age of the system. We need to put a cap on what we will spend to just “fix” it. The plan with this bond vote is to recondition and replace the ice system, not just repair it. We have had some shaky incidents over the years. We have been running on borrowed time, and also with the HUD grant running out, this is an urgent situation.

Heidi asked about summer activities and what would it mean if at some point it was no longer a recreational facility, what does that mean for outdoor sports that use the facility? Karen said from March on there is indoor soccer with Missisquoi River Rats, which is 200-300 kids. Jean Gagne hosts some great softball clinics. Franklin, Swanton and Sheldon Little League also use the building in the spring. Field hockey camps and lacrosse also use it, depending on the weather. St. Albans does not offer turf like we do. July 1 – September is

the down time. They have hosted craft shows, yoga classes, bike safety classes, co-ed adult soccer and more. MAHA tries to keep the building open and accessible as much as possible.

Kim went over what is included in the proposed renovation: this is just to fix the ice system, which means ripping up all the cement. Previous versions had included other items, but those are not included here. Heidi pointed out that MAHA runs the facility, they operate it, invest in it, cover insurance costs and are moving towards a goal. It's a unique spot to be in, not many towns are in the same position. It would be a shame to see the momentum stop.

Steve ended the informational session by stating you can vote any time prior to November 4th via absentee. On November 4th the polls are open from 7am -- 7pm at Highgate Elementary School. Steve thanked everyone for the momentum in moving this forward. We all get involved when we have "skin in the game", but many of these volunteers don't have skin in the game. Some are not even from this town. These folks won't stand and tell you who they are, but they do deserve to be thanked for all they have done, continue to do, and will do going forward.

The informational meeting ended at 7:50pm.

Minutes submitted by: Wendi Dusablon, Highgate Town Clerk 10/31/2014