

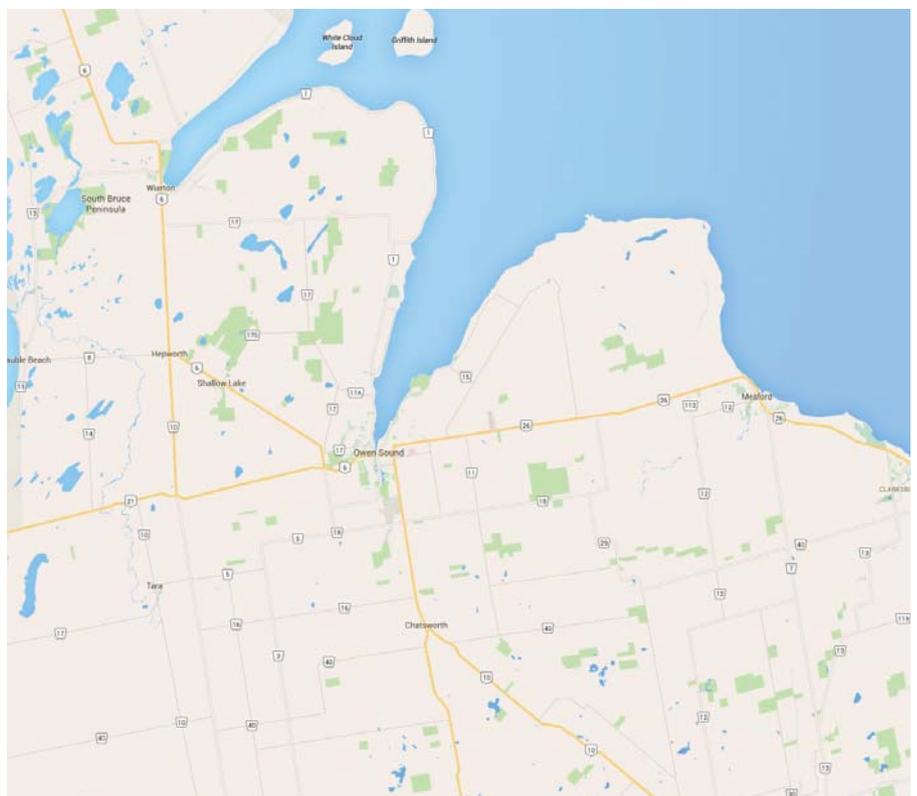
ARE NRUFs KILLING LACROSSE IN OWEN SOUND?

>> BY MICHELLE MORRA-CARLISLE

FOR THE PRIVILEGE OF PLAYING a minor sport in Owen Sound, non-residents pay an extra fee to help cover facility costs. It has been that way for decades. Residents of Owen Sound's two largest surrounding municipalities, Georgian Bluffs and Meaford, have been exempt from this fee because their municipalities had a recreation agreement with Owen Sound. The townships contributed to the cost of recreation in Owen Sound and received representation on the city's Recreation and Parks' Committee. These partnerships ended, however, in 2012 and the impact of that change on Owen Sound Minor Lacrosse is now a hotly debated subject.

The last round of negotiations "didn't go as well as we had hoped," says Jim McManaman, Owen Sound City Councillor and Chair of the Recreation and Parks Committee. The city requested \$72,875 from Georgian Bluffs (considerably more than the \$47,788 it previously paid) and \$25,625 from Meaford. The requested amounts were based on what percentage of participants each municipality represents (Owen Sound, whose own residents make up 85% of its minor sports population, pays \$540,129).

According to council, the amounts previously contributed didn't come close to reflecting the true cost of recreation in Owen Sound; meanwhile rising costs and decreased provincial support place increased pressure on municipal finances.



In the end, the three municipalities failed to reach an agreement. Therefore a non-resident user fee (NRUF) of \$100 for field and floor sports, or \$167 for ice sports, now applies to the residents of surrounding communities, including Meaford and Georgian Bluffs. The fee is charged per child and per sport.

The rationale is generally that everyone pays a fair amount for the services they receive. Owen Sound residents pay taxes toward their

sports facilities, and non-residents pay their share through NRUFs. The most unusual twist in the policy is that the non-resident fee applies only to youth sport, while adult, non-resident users, like those in the local men's recreational hockey league, are exempt.

McManaman doesn't dispute that sports are great for health and wellness, build character and benefit communities. He comes from a background of minor sports and is

well aware of what they cost. For 25 years he has been involved in minor soccer as an executive member, a coach and a volunteer. But as a city councillor he knows that running minor sports and facilities are rarely a break-even scenario for municipalities.

"Recreational facilities are heavily subsidized by the taxpayer," he says. Owen Sound has three arenas which, after the income they generate, cost the city approximately \$750,000 a year. In addition, taxpayers foot the bill for a 30% subsidy offered to all minor sports, on their facility rental fees.

Between municipalities wanting to recover costs and users demanding affordable recreation, facility operators are caught in the middle. "Operating costs continue to increase," says John Milton, Chief Administrative Officer of the Ontario Recreation Facilities Association in Toronto. Also, buildings don't last forever. Like old cars, old sports facilities require repairs and maintenance that, if neglected, start to compromise user safety. "Many of our facilities are 30 or 40 years old," Milton says. "They're in that senior part of their lifecycle and at some point will be retired."

Ted Kitto, President of Owen Sound Minor Lacrosse (OSML), gets plenty of feedback from parents of registered and formerly-registered players and says "animosity towards these fees" is a common theme. The NRUF affects families differently depending on where they live.

Some municipalities reimburse their residents, in varying amounts and in different ways. Georgian Bluffs subsidizes its residents to the tune of 75% of the non-resident user fee. Meaford pays 90% and, thanks to an agreement with Owen Sound, streamlined the process this year. Meaford residents pay their 10% of the NRUF at registration. Owen Sound tallies the number of registrants and submits one invoice to Meaford for payment, so families are spared the hassle of paying the full amount, filling out a form, mailing a receipt and waiting for a refund.

Kitto says that Owen Sound has been equitable in applying the fee to leagues across the board. But the process becomes inequitable, he says, because of the differing reimbursement rates of neighbouring municipalities.

The Township of Chatsworth offers no reimbursement of the NRUF. Kitto describes how this affects a family he knows in that town. Each of the three athletic children in the household plays three minor sports. At \$100 per child, per sport, that's \$900 the

family must pay on top of their registration fees. "Few families can carry that kind of financial burden," Kitto says.

One argument — on both sides — has to do with what a large proportion of Owen Sound minor athletes come from Georgian Bluffs or Meaford. Depending on the sport, roughly 63% of children enrolled in minor sports in Owen Sound are locals, 21% come from Georgian Bluffs and 7% come from Meaford. Another 9% are from other neighbouring towns.

"When roughly 40% of the people using our facilities are from outside our municipality," McManaman says, "there has to be some fee, whether the municipality pays it or the individuals pay it, to cover that cost."

Yet those numbers are also a good reason not to alienate and ultimately lose those non-resident players. Kitto's view is that the children of Owen Sound cannot support minor sports on their own. "They simply do not have the numbers to support enough teams to permit healthy competition and growth," he says, adding that when non-residents come to Owen Sound for a game or practice, it's good for local business.

Are NRUFs a viable solution? According to McManaman, the city is achieving the financial goals it had set to try and bring some financial fairness to the system. "Certainly we've heard from the minor sports groups that the fee is not popular," he says, "but the city has a financial obligation to its citizens."

The danger is that if user costs rise to the point where users are discouraged from participating, enrolment numbers will drop, making cost recovery a self-defeating effort. Owen Sound Minor Lacrosse registrations dropped from 567 in 2011 to 279 in 2014. Other minor sports in the city report similar declines.

While the new NRUF policy has been in place since 2013, registration numbers started to decline several years before. McManaman admits to a drop in sports registrations but adds that, "At the same time, we see in Grey and Bruce Counties here that our school board has seen approximately a 19% drop in enrollment since 2004. That is a factor as well."

Kitto, too, acknowledges the decline in school enrollment. "I cannot blame faltering minor lacrosse enrollment solely on NRUFs," he says. "Our demographics are changing... but placing additional fees on families is a hardship." He has seen many families entirely remove their children from Owen Sound

minor sports, enrolling them elsewhere or not at all. Some municipalities are finding other ways for their young athletes to play lacrosse. Shallow Lake has a pick-up league in which some past Owen Sound players are now participating, and Saugeen Shores has started a similar program.

Zone 8 Lacrosse, the regional Ontario Lacrosse Association (OLA) administrative body, is still considering its options, one of which may be to pull out of Owen Sound. "With Rep lacrosse, one strategy might be a full departure from the City of Owen Sound," says Nicole Roe, Zone 8 Director. "Removing the house league program may have an adverse reaction on a significant percentage of families. We may lose several Owen Sound families but may gain some families from Georgian Bluffs, Wiarton and Chatsworth areas." In the meantime, Zone 8 Lacrosse has an aggressive promotional campaign this year to attract new players through social media, traditional media, flyers, school newsletters and advocacy.

Asked what would be a better solution than non-resident user fees, Kitto says a return to recreation agreements between municipalities "would permit the city to recuperate facility costs without alienating families from minor sports." But that can only happen if Owen Sound, Georgian Bluffs and Meaford reach a new recreation agreement.

McManaman is open to future discussions. Meanwhile, the city maintains its commitment to recreation. Kitto credits the city for partnering with OSML to raise awareness, attempt to simplify the refund process and promote minor sports. "That's a great start," Kitto says. "Reduced hourly rates would also help." Owen Sound currently has the highest hourly floor time rate in the Zone according to Roe. Current hourly rates range from a low of \$40 in Milton and North Perth to a high of \$70 in Owen Sound. The Zone 8 average across nine municipalities is \$56 per hour.

Owen Sound has offered free advertising in a city minor sports publication, as well as free floor time for a one-day skills and drills function. It has also agreed to highlight Owen Sound Minor Lacrosse at a Doors Open event on June 6th and 7th in partnership with the league.

Kitto says the OSML executive understands that it, too, has a role in working towards more cost-effective operations, increasing awareness of lacrosse, making it more attractive to potential athletes and retaining current ones. "We are working hard to achieve success in all of these areas," he says. **OLM**