

Boca council warms up to the building of an ice rink

By Luis F. Perez
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Boca Raton· If it all works out, there could be ice in Boca Raton sometime in the next few years.

The City Council took an initial step toward building an ice rink on city-owned land on Monday.

The five-member council asked Mickey Gomez, the city's recreation services director, to develop guidelines that builders could use for proposals to put up a rink with 21/2 sheets of ice. Gomez said it would probably take four to six months before the city even solicits builders. Plans would then require council approval.

"Let's see what proposals we get," Gomez said.

Gomez gave his recommendations to the council summing up months of research prompted by requests from residents for an ice rink.

He suggested the city look for a developer to build on 5 to 8 acres just east of the library under construction on Spanish River Boulevard. The city would contribute the land, valued at \$4 million to \$6.4 million, Gomez said. The developer would pay construction costs, estimated at \$20 million to \$25 million, and run the rink, he said.

City Manager Leif Ahnell said a private developer alone probably couldn't make an ice rink work because of the high cost of land. Maybe a couple of years ago a developer could have done it, he said.

Gomez said figures show an ice rink could generate about \$4 million a year in revenue and cost about \$2 million to run. Ahnell said that while the city could borrow money to build and operate the rink and probably break even, it doesn't have any expertise in running a successful rink.

"Our staff isn't in the ice rink operating business," he said.

Proponents of the project have swamped City Hall with hundreds of e-mails and signatures on petitions.

Gomez cited other numbers he found in his research: 300 youths registered in roller hockey at Sugar Sand Park who say they would prefer ice, and about 40 percent of 500,000 annual users of Incredible Ice in Coral Springs and 38 percent of Florida Panthers season ticket holders live in south Palm Beach County.

He estimated 500,000 to 600,000 users a year would visit a Boca Raton ice rink.

Mayor Steven Abrams said asking for a proposal doesn't bind the city to build a rink. Soliciting proposals would give the city options and flexibility if it decided to build the project, he said.

Councilman M.J. "Mike" Arts suggested Gomez explore putting the rink on the south side of Spanish River Boulevard. The land on the north side could prove valuable to the city's efforts to attract biomedical research companies, Arts said.

Councilman Bill Hager wanted to make sure residents would have priority when it came to using the rink. Gomez assured him they would.

The parks and recreation official said he would begin talking to experts in the ice rink business. He has received up to 20 unsolicited phone calls and e-mails offering suggestions, he said.

The rink could be up by 2009 in a best-case scenario, Gomez said.

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