

Profit is more than icing

Arena's new business manager shoots for goals of happy customers, better bottom line

BY LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

From pucks to bucks, balancing ice arena finances can be a daunting task.

That's why the city of Farmington Hills hired Tom Murphy, who has a knack for turning an arena's bottom line from looking like the crimson stripe of center ice into the black of an official puck.

Murphy, 37, starts in the new business manager position at the Farmington Hills Ice Arena March 30. He'll work with Al Strasser, who was recently named ice arena manager.

The Minnesotan worked as parks and recreation director in Melvindale before joining the Downriver Community Conference in Southgate. Melvindale subsidized its ice arena to the tune of \$100,000 a year, but that music stopped and so did the



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Tom Murphy
—business manager
Farmington Hills Ice
Arena

money. Murphy had to find a way to make up the difference, which he did.

"It was a lot of customer satisfaction stuff," said Murphy, who lives in Berkley. "We made people's experience at the arena a healthy and happy one."

During his tenure, Murphy added a skate sharpener and made the ice arena's pro shop profitable.

Murphy's task in Farmington Hills is not a dire one. The arena is breaking even financially and is busy 14 hours, seven days a week.

Two years ago, the arena made \$25,000. That money was used to pay for a vestibule in front of the facility on Eight Mile Road, said Dan Potter, Hills Special Services director.

"First of all, the goal is to have the arena pay for itself in terms of debt retirement, operations and maintenance," said Potter, "and, if practical, make a dollar or two to replace or repair anything that may break down."

Aside from ice rental revenue, the arena generates money through its pro shop and concession sales. Projected net revenue from non-ice operations is \$223,000.

"That's going to be Tom's role in trying to raise that," Potter said.

Murphy's challenges start this summer when both sheets of ice will be in operation.

"It's a unique problem: You can't sell ice during the weekends; everyone wants to be out in the summer sun having fun," Murphy said.

In 1999, one side of the arena will be used for dry floor activities during the summer. Murphy's experience with those was mixed in Melvindale.

Community concerts proved popular. When the arena manager tried to go contemporary, though, a gig featuring Rick Derringer didn't go well. "It was a little too rock 'n' roll for the Melvindale constituents," Murphy said. "You live and learn."

Murphy learned from a young age what an ice arena means to a community, growing up in hockey-mad Minnesota. He graduated from the University of Minnesota-Duluth in 1983 and went to work for a YMCA branch in Oklahoma.

He returned to northern climes, joining the YMCA Downriver Branch in Wyandotte where he worked from 1984-88. He worked at the Y's Fairlane Branch before becoming parks and recreation director in Melvindale.

Since 1994, he's been program manager at the Southgate-based Downriver Community Conference, which provides economic development, employment services and substance abuse counseling services in the region.

He's excited by what lies ahead. The Farmington Hills Ice Arena has a strong community support, he said. He wants to strengthen the covenant between the taxpayers — who backed the arena — and city by making the operation fiscally firm.

"Taxpayers put their name on that; we have to protect it," Murphy said.

AGENDAS

**Farmington Hills
City Council**
City Hall, 474-6115
7:30 p.m. Monday, March 23

Agenda items include:

- Historical Commission annual report given by Ruth Mochlin
- Farmington Community Library Director Beverly Papal's report on expansion and ballot language proposed for Aug. 4 primary.
- Fire department annual report.
- Talk about liquor license escrow issues.
- Consider special assessment districts for road, sewer and water improvements on Gladstone Street.

Farmington School Board
Schulman Administration Building
489-3300
7:30 p.m. Tuesday, March 24

Agenda items include:

- Recognition of Teachers of the Year.
- Appointment of Farmington High School principal.
- Approval of lighted football field study committee recommendations.
- Award bids for Power Middle School roof renovation, remainder of phase one projects at Duncle Middle School and Farmington High School.
- Resolution on school elections consolidation bills.
- Appoint auditor.
- Focus issue: Student-led conferences.

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