

Bancroft Minor Hockey Association working on solutions to declining membership

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By Nate Smelle

For decades the Bancroft and District Minor Hockey Association has been providing local children with an opportunity to play Canada's favourite sport in their hometown.

Association president Ed Mountney has experienced firsthand how valuable minor hockey is to the community.

"In Bancroft, it's more than just the game that's being played on the ice, it's the relationships and the memories that are being created," said Mountney.

"Hockey means different things to different people, it's the players, yes but also the parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, coaches, etc. It's family life in the winter to some. It's very regular to see at least three generations of families in the arena on any given weekend."

If you ask people what hockey means to them, you will get many different answers, from the three-year-old new skater to the grandparent, and those answers change throughout their lifetime.

Mountney would like to see the minor hockey association be able to provide the opportunity for as many people as possible to discover what hockey means to them. Not only does he want to see minor hockey in Bancroft become sustainable, he would also like to see the association be able to provide hockey at a price that allows as many kids as possible to experience it.

Despite the enjoyment so many have experienced through playing minor hockey in Bancroft, in recent years the association has observed a sharp decrease in the number of kids signing up. During the 2015/2016 season the association's treasurer, Tyler Peters said, there were 200 kids playing on teams locally and now just four years later, the association now only has approximately 100 members. According to Peters, there are several reasons for the declining number of registrations in Bancroft including the fact that more and more kids are leaving town to play in neighbouring centres each year.

"Some parents do indicate that it seems to be cheaper to travel for their kids to play in another centre. But, if you live in Bancroft you need to think about what the costs are of travelling to say Apsley two or three times a week - fuel, mileage, wear and tear on your vehicle, time," said Peters.

"By the time you take all that into account the cost goes up."

Peters said the association has been taking steps to prevent the number of memberships from declining any further. For instance, Peters said the Bancroft and District Minor Hockey Association has been lobbying the Ontario Minor Hockey Association to put rules in place that would ensure kids register for a team in the community where they live. The cost to register a child with a local team is higher than in most neighbouring communities and he recognizes this is why so many families have decided to take their kids elsewhere to play hockey.

The higher cost of membership for players in Bancroft is due in part to the fact ice rental rates at the North Hastings Community Centre have gone up by 19 per cent since the 2015/2016 season, making them 40 per cent more than ice rental rates at adjacent communities.

To compensate for the reduction of revenue due to the declining memberships, Mountney said the association has been operating on its reserves. Understanding that this is not a long-term solution, he said the board of executives is actively developing a fundraising strategy to ensure the long-term sustainability of minor hockey in Bancroft.

Acknowledging the generosity of the association's many corporate sponsors, Mountney said they would like to see more local businesses sponsor teams. On top of the many other fundraising initiatives such as raffles, 50/50 draws and funds generated from admissions to games, he said the association has several new ideas. These include, a gala fundraiser and the first-ever mineral capital hockey tournament. While the planning of the gala is still underway, Mountney said the tournament is already scheduled to be held on March 2 and 3 in Bancroft.

"The board members have lots of ideas for extra fundraising, but it's difficult to follow through on them all," said Mountney.

"We can always use extra volunteer help, from our planned tournament in March to our tri-sport tournament in August, to fundraising committees, to new initiatives, etc."

Recognizing the cost of equipment is also a factor preventing many families from registering their children for minor hockey in

Bancroft, Peters added that they are working with Canadian Tire Jumpstart program to help make the sport more affordable for kids from low-income families.

To learn more about opportunities to support Bancroft and District Minor Hockey Association, and the upcoming mineral capital hockey tournament visit their website at www.bancroftjets.com.