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Ronnie Polaneczky: In this city of 'pay to play,' this kind could help schools



By Ronnie Polaneczky Philadelphia Daily News Daily News Columnist

DEAR Philadelphia School Reform Commissioners:

Tim Horan wants to pay money to the school district, but administrators won't let him.

So I'm hoping that you'll lend an ear to Horan, who has identified a nice revenue stream for the district if you guys are willing to think outside the stodgy box that is 440 N. Broad St.

You'd love the energetic Horan. He co-owns Philadelphia Sport and Social Club, a for-profit Mangyunk company that organizes fun activities for adults.

Last year he spent \$250,000 to rent gyms and athletic fields so that his co-ed members could play football, soccer, volleyball and other sweaty games after work and on the weekends.

These are good folks, by the way - mostly young professionals not inclined to drink, puke and curse their way around the bases. Instead, after games, they convene at designated watering holes for wings, brews and blab.

"They just want fresh air, exercise and company," says Horan. "It's really wholesome."

And really needed in a town with a "fattest city" rep.

Anyway, commissioners, Horan would love to rent space from the Philadelphia School District, whose hundreds of gyms and fields often sit empty after hours. His company is fully insured, and he'd pay a healthy fee to cover maintenance and staff costs.

But he has been told that the district won't rent to a for-profit.

Ditto for Jason Cooper, a friendly competitor of Horan's. He owns Philadelphia Sports Network, spends \$100,000 a year in rental fees, and would spend far more if the district would only rent to him.

"We have a waiting list of people who want to play, but there aren't enough places," he says. "We could be giving the district a lot of money."

Instead, both men rent space from private schools and gyms whose owners know how to milk a cash cow.

Friends Select School, at 17th and the Parkway, for example, allows Horan's members to play at the school three nights a week, for a \$1,000 monthly fee.

Says Horan: "That's \$12,000 a year for space that's just sitting there. It's so easy. But the district doesn't want our money."

District spokeswoman Shana Kemp says that the for-profit ban, crafted in 1981, is a necessity.

"If for-profits used the schools, it would squeeze out nonprofits that couldn't afford to pay what private companies can," she says.

So why not craft a sliding-fee scale? Or designate fewer evenings to for-profit rental?

"It would be a monster of a job to sort that out," Kemp says.

No more so than figuring out whether to cut a bilingual counselor or police officer from a school, but, hell, what do I know?

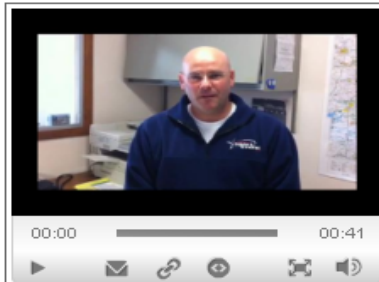
Anyway, Kemp adds, if the district were to rent space, its nonprofit status with the IRS would be thrown into jeopardy.

But, wait - the district already rents space to outsiders.

The murkiness irks City Controller Alan Butkovitz.

"It sounds to me like the district doesn't want the administrative hassle," he says when I ask his opinion of Horan's and Cooper's request.

"But the district is in a financial crunch. They need to get creative about finding revenue. The SRC should research the tax issue, because this is actually a really interesting idea."



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In case you think that big bureaucracy can't handle the administration of a rental program, look no further than City Hall.

Since the city merged the Recreation Department with the Fairmount Park system to form the Philadelphia Parks and Recreation Department, the entity has streamlined its permit process to make it easier for all groups, not just nonprofits, to use the city's amenities.

"There's an emphasis on getting as many Philadelphians inside our facilities as we can," says Leo Dignam, deputy commissioner.

Cooper has been thrilled.

"The department has worked really hard to find space for our groups," he says. One rec center, he says, now opens its doors to his group on Sundays, and he pays to man it.

"A lot of our members had never been inside the rec centers, because so many activities there are geared toward youth," says Cooper. "Once they're inside, they feel a real sense of pride about the city and where they live, because they feel connected to these institutions."

Which brings me, Commissioners, to an important point.

Because so many of our public schools look dreary on the outside, many young parents don't consider the schools as an educational option for their kids. Get them inside, though, and they are often surprised by the colorful art on the walls, the gaily decorated bulletin boards, the feeling of vibrancy that lingers after kids have gone home for the day.

The question has always been: So how do we get more parents inside, to feel the magic?

By renting space to them, the way Friends Select has been doing for decades. Its rooftop tennis court, basement swimming pool and full-size gym are all available for a price.

"We see it as a great marketing strategy," Friends spokeswoman Colleen Pucket tells me. "If people are familiar with our facility, maybe they'll consider us for their own children."

Imagine that, Commissioners: a marketing program that actually earns money for a school.

Can we give it a try?

Email polaner@phillynews.com or call 215-854-2217. For recent columns:

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