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Playing Ball Just Got More Expensive

By Cathy Tyson



Lafayette Little League players Ross Ney, Jack Larsen and Michael O'Donnell pose after winning a game at Buckeye Fields. Photo C. Tyson

Come July, it's going to cost more to play ball in Lafayette. Since the last fee increase for field users was more than ten years ago, and a recent analysis showed fees were \$20,000 short of covering their share of maintenance costs, users will soon be asked to pitch in a bit more.

The \$20,000 shortage is a problem, since City Manager Steven Falk took a close look at all city expenses and recommended cutting \$500,000 in annual general fund expenses as part of the 2010-2011 mid-year budget review. Presuming flat revenue and increasing police costs, all city departments, including Parks Trails and Recreation, were instructed to eat their fair share of the budget-cut pie.

Jennifer Russell, Parks Trails and Recreation Director, held four meetings and invited all of the sports field users to help look for a solution, "We had a good back and forth discussion, although we didn't always agree. We looked at established policies and actual maintenance and utility costs," she said.

Parks Trails and Recreation Commission Vice-Chair Mark Poole explained that everyone understood the need for the fee increase, "The question was how much and on whom?"

It's complicated dividing up a limited resource among disparate user groups, while keeping in mind the need for adequate field time. A number of factors were analyzed: established fee policies and the existing preferential use agreement with Lafayette Little League, a variety of league sizes - some are substantially larger than others - whether an organization is completely run by parent volunteers, and more. One important component is the quantity of Lafayette children who play in Lafayette Little League - their parents are paying taxes to the city.

Soccer and Lacrosse fees are already slightly higher than baseball and softball because of greater wear and tear of the fields, but their fees will rise too.

There's a substantial range of field use time, for example Lafayette Little League uses Buckeye Fields on St. Mary's Road for approximately 2,500 hours per year, while Lafayette Moraga Youth Association (LMYA) soccer only uses it for 275 hours. The Community Park fields are also heavily used by Lafayette Little League at 1,500 hours, while the Lamorinda Baseball Academy uses them for only for 184 hours.

At a recent City Council meeting Randy Russo, Board Member of LMYA said, "Field cost is our biggest expense. We went through the numbers, and we can handle an increase now - but a future increase will be very difficult." He added that LMYA is a recreational league; they strive to keep prices reasonable.

Maintenance and utilities for the entire Lafayette Community Park costs \$129,000 per year, most of that, \$107,700, is spent on maintenance and utilities at the sports fields, and supporting facilities. Buckeye Fields' costs are similar, with maintenance and utilities of \$122,300; \$101,200 of that is spent on upkeep of the sports fields.

All of the various versions of plans were weighed to arrive at an hourly rate that could be applied uniformly. The new fee schedule divides user groups into categories: established seasonal leagues with over 75% Lafayette residency, Club or Select teams, daily camps, clinics and tournaments, then finally hourly short-term rentals.

In the old system Lafayette Little League and Lafayette Soccer paid a set amount per team; starting in July, instead of the set fee, it will cost Lafayette Little League \$8 per hour per field; Lafayette Soccer Leagues will pay \$15 per hour per field. Club and Select teams that had paid \$8 to \$12 per hour per field in the past will start paying \$20 - \$25 per field, per hour. Finally day camps and clinics will see their rates go from \$115 per day for baseball and softball to \$180, with similar increases for soccer and lacrosse.

What's going on with the Bike Park?

The long anticipated Lafayette Bike Park is in a holding pattern while government agencies are doing lengthy reviews as part of the required permit process. The City of Lafayette Parks Trails and Recreation Department has been working with bike park consultants, Hilride, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the US Army Corps of Engineers along with a biological consultant to ensure the proposed bike park is in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act and state and federal permit regulations.

"We appreciate your patience while we work through this process. We are committed to complying with the environmental regulations and creating a safe and fun bike riding facility for people of all ages and skill levels in the community of Lafayette," said Jennifer Russell, Parks Trails and Recreation Director.

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