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Beach volleyball season up in the air after city spikes league's contract

By Kelly Grant and Sarah Boesveld
From Thursday's Globe and Mail

14-year-old club, , Not So Pro Sports, owes Toronto more than \$300,000

Toronto's Ashbridge's Bay and Woodbine Park were little more than empty expanses of sand when John Morrison brought volleyball to the Beaches in 1996.

The sports fanatic, who has backpacked through Central America and adopted the mantra "live to play," has spent 14 years building from scratch the largest recreational beach volleyball club in North America, with weekday players setting, bumping and spiking until dusk on as many as 85 city-owned courts.

But now, that league is officially dead after city council blocked a last-ditch attempt to keep it at the Beaches. It turns out the league's name, Not So Pro Sports, is apt: The club owes the municipal government \$327,875.

That's why Toronto's top parks bureaucrat elected not to extend the club's deal when it expired last year. Yesterday, council voted 33-2 in favour of turning beach volleyball operations over to the not-for-profit Ontario Volleyball Association, which has promised to pay the city more than \$1.4-million over the next five years.

"It's a travesty!" Mr. Morrison said as he stormed out of the council chambers before the final vote could even be cast.

"Fourteen years of working on this from scratch and they're talking about capital improvements? I'm sorry, folks ... the story is general manager [of the parks department] is running the City of Toronto, not anybody else," he told reporters before escaping into an elevator.

Later, in an interview with The Globe and Mail, he was reflective yet still outraged at the decision that he said has turned much of his business upside down.

"This is heartbreaking, this is disillusioning beyond belief," he said. "I believe that there were some well-intentioned councillors, but the factual errors and the wrong information that was being said in council chambers [Wednesday] has frustrated all of us to no end."

Not So Pro's contract with the city was very detailed, he contends. He said he gave the city \$23,000 in 2009 and \$1-million in 2005.

"There are all kinds of contractual obligations on both ends that needed to be looked at," he said, adding that he never got a chance to sit down with the city to discuss the decision beforehand.

"We created the revenue stream that's on that beach, we created the network of volleyball players," said the marketing and promotions manager who splits his time between Toronto and Niagara, where Not So Pro also holds sporting events. "These are great people, these are fantastic people, and we've built a vibrant volleyball community in Toronto."

Not So Pro's league operated on 85 courts at Ashbridge's and Woodbine from 5 p.m. till dusk on spring and summer weeknights.

The final chapter of Not So Pro's story at the beaches began Dec. 7, when Brenda Patterson, the city's general manager of parks, forestry and recreation, signed a letter refusing to extend its most recent five-year contract. The agreement stipulated that the general manager had sole discretion to extend the deal; when she chose not to do so because the league was in arrears, the city put out a request for bids to replace Not So Pro beginning this summer.

Only one group bid: The Ontario Volleyball Association, the sport's official governing body in the province. Staff recommended council endorse a deal with the OVA that includes rent of \$150,000 and a cut of gross revenues annually, plus \$400,000 in the first two years to fix up Ashbridge's Bay Park and Woodbine Beach Park.

That's what council voted to do Wednesday, but not before hours of questions and debate as councillors tried to sort out the glaring discrepancies between Mr. Morrison's story and that of city staff.

Mr. Morrison wrote on Not So Pro's blog that city staff told him on Jan. 25 - the day the call for bids went out - that "we were not allowed to bid as we were considered to be in bad standing."

Ms. Patterson said that wasn't the case. The club was allowed to bid, though it's unlikely they would have won, considering their debt to the city, she said.

As to why Mr. Morrison's league failed to pay its bills, Mr. Morrison wrote on his blog that the outstanding payments amounted to three monthly rent cheques of \$37,625, a \$5,000 recycling fee, and \$210,000 to build a new bathing station. Mr. Morrison wrote that he asked the city to postpone the bathing station payments until the next five-year term of the contract because Not So Pro was also paying \$25,000 per year to build a park at Ashbridge's Bay, slated to break ground this year.

"I asked in 2007, 2008 and 2009 by writing, making phone calls and having meetings, expressing that we need to finish one project at a time and that it was a financial hardship on our company to fulfill [two] major projects in the first five years, and it would create a cash flow problem," Mr. Morrison wrote.


Ms. Patterson countered during the meeting Wednesday that Not So Pro offered to pay for the park and bathing station when they submitted their last winning bid in 2004, meaning they knew their obligations from the outset.

Councillors Mike Del Grande and Bill Saundercook urged their colleagues to cancel the Jan. 25 request for proposals, giving Not So Pro another chance. "I think they made a very compelling case that they built this operation from scratch," Mr. Saundercook said. "If they're going to agree to the terms of payment here I say give them a shot."

But council voted overwhelmingly against their motions. "We have spent way too much time discussing this issue here when we should just be taking care of some basic housekeeping, allowing our department to operate on a businesslike model, instead of trying to go back and put our foot in our bureaucratic mouth at every possible opportunity," Councillor Adrian Heaps said.

The fate of players who have registered for Not So Pro's beach leagues this year is up in the air. But Kristine Drakich, the president of the OVA, said the association wants to accommodate them.

"It's a giant adult playground and we want to continue to have it that way. Our business plan is to work as much as possible to keep the existing style of programming there," she said.

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