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May 12, 2004. 01:00 AM

City won't see \$1M in rec fees, auditor estimates

Users owe \$4.5M for city programs, councillors told

Parks commissioner advises against harsh crackdown

PAUL MOLONEY
CITY HALL BUREAU

The City of Toronto will never see a big chunk of almost \$4.5 million in unpaid fees for parks and recreation programs, council's audit committee was told yesterday.

About \$719,000 is more than a year overdue and some delinquent accounts go back as far as 1999, city auditor-general Jeff Griffiths told the committee.

Griffiths said it's safe to predict \$1 million of the outstanding amount will never be collected.

He suggested city council consider cutting off access to city facilities, charging interest on overdue fees and calling in collection agencies.

But parks commissioner Joe Halstead argued against draconian measures to collect the \$4.486 million, of which about \$800,000 is owed by

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individuals and the rest by organizations.

"Do we say, `Don't come back until you've paid?'" Halstead said. "These are hundreds, literally hundreds, of soccer groups, hockey groups, swim clubs, baseball groups, a variety of other groups."

Halstead said denying access would appear to conflict with the city's policy of encouraging people to use the 115 community centres, 211 aquatic facilities, 372 tennis courts and 121 ice surfaces.

"I have a problem saying to an organization, the majority of whom are volunteer organizations ... we're not going to let you through the door until you've collected and submit to the city every bit of receivable that you owe us," he said.

"We're saying to those organizations, in effect, that you no longer deserve facilities and those kids, primarily kids, who are utilizing those facilities ... they will now have nothing to do."

Some councillors on the audit committee argued going easy on delinquents penalizes the majority of groups that pay up.

The recreation department offers about 54,000 programs and 3,000 community events a year and generates about \$54 million in gross revenues.

Halstead said he's not advocating writing off the debts but rather wants to work with debtors to set up repayment plans.

The committee directed Halstead to report in September on the status of collection efforts.

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