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1 message

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Hoffman Estates dissolves Sears Centre committee
By Ashok Selvam | Daily Herald Staff
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Sears Centre officials say they won't change the way they operate now that the Hoffman Estates board has dissolved the volunteer ad hoc arena committee, which began convening last year.

The village board on Tuesday voted to dissolve the committee, with Trustee Raymond Kincaid casting the only vote against the action. Trustee Cary Collins did not attend the meeting.

Kincaid wanted the committee expanded so more village officials could be involved. The committee was formed to help keep the village board informed about the arena.

"I feel more eyes on the building would be beneficial," Kincaid said.

Now Sears Centre business will fall under the village's finance committee and it appears the village plans to rely on a new employee to do the work of the five-member committee. The person hasn't been hired, but the village has authorized a group to spend \$20,000 to search for the new hire.

Kincaid, who served on the committee, pointed out the volunteer group did not cost the village anything in terms of salary.

The committee has met 14 times since September 2009, usually on Monday mornings. Its biggest task involved interviewing potential operators for the Sears Centre, the 11,000-seat arena off the Addams Tollway and Rte. 59.

As the village prepared to take over ownership of the troubled building from a private company late last year, officials spoke with firms interested in running the building and booking events. The village eventually choose Global Spectrum, whose mother company is cable giant Comcast Corp.

Under new management, village officials said the arena's financial picture has improved. Successful events have reduced the amount of money officials projected the building would lose this year. Kincaid said the number is down from a projected \$1.2 million to \$900,000. Besides losses from operations, the village could owe the bank up to \$88.4 million for the construction loan over 22 years, depending on how successful the venue is.

The ad hoc committee meetings were open to the public, but rarely was anyone seated in the audience. Committee members would review financial numbers and watch presentations from officials, including Sears Centre General Manager Ben Gibbs. They would make recommendations to the village board if a vote was needed. Gibbs said dissolving the committee won't change the information he delivers.

"From what I can tell it's just one group to another group," he said, referring to reporting to the finance committee.

Mayor William McLeod on Tuesday said the committee was never meant to be permanent, and that the village would benefit from having an owner's representative to protect village interests. The representative, unlike the members of the dissolved committee, would have experience in the arena business.

Kincaid and Trustee Gary Pilafas served on the ad hoc advisory committee, which also consisted of local residents with business experience: Joel Koenig, Gary Stanton and Georgeanna Mehr.

Village Manager James Norris and Village Attorney Art Janura also attended meetings. Assistant Village Manager Mark Koplun was taken off his normal village duties to concentrate on arena matters and assisted the committee, as did consultant Joe Briglia, whose contract wasn't renewed.

Kincaid said he hoped the village would consider hiring Briglia as the owner's representative.

Trustee Karen Mills said there's still ample opportunity for the community to be involved with the Sears Centre. "We need to take responsibility and go forward at this point," Mills said.