

Schools set facility use fee schedule

By Gracie Hart Brooks, Staff Reporter (Reprinted with permission of Gracie Hart Brooks)

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After hours and on weekends, Orange County Schools host everything from youth league sports to parks and recreation programs to church services. But beginning in March, some of those groups likely will have to pay to use Orange County Public School facilities.

After months of work and discussions, school board members now have a new fee schedule in place for groups wanting to use school facilities for a short time. Work began in June on the school board's facility use guidelines. Board members suggested various revisions with several goals in mind, including minimizing costs to non-profit and youth-serving organizations while charging for-profit organizations full costs and reasonable user fees. Board members agreed the school budget should not subsidize these activities.

A new application for facility use was developed and will be implemented March 1. Some groups will pay a utility fee, applicable from 6-11 p.m. weeknights and all hours on weekends and holidays. Some groups will also pay a usage fee, applicable to all available hours, and some will pay a \$30 personnel fee to have a school employee open and close the building.

"We're being conservative with costs," Orange County Public School Superintendent Dr. Bob Grimesey said. "When you cut the lights on and heat the building, [there's a cost]. We have an obligation to the taxpayers. We're trying to balance stewardship with keeping the building open."

The heat in school buildings is turned down at 6 p.m. and comes on at 6 a.m. Any time the heat is turned on at different times, costs are incurred. Officials estimate it costs \$125 to fire up the gym for an hour in January.

"By not charging a fee, we'll continue to underwrite the cost," Grimesey said.

The new policy would charge the \$30 personnel fee to school-related groups, Orange County Parks and Recreation organized and operated events, county government agencies and elected officials conducting town meetings. These groups would not pay a utility fee or usage fee. Grimesey said a county-conducted public hearing would incur a minimal fee, depending on when the meeting was conducted. He said some public hearings have already incurred fees.

Meanwhile, non-school groups serving youth within the county would pay the personnel fee and a utility fee, but no usage fee. Utility fees, charged for use after hours, are per hour and based on the space used. The gym is \$10 and the Hornet Sports Center is \$15. The cafeteria, kitchen, library, auditorium and fields with electricity are \$5 and classrooms are \$2.50. There is no charge for the use of fields without electricity.

All other groups would pay the personnel fee, utility fee and usage fee. Like the utility fee, the usage fee is charged per hour based on the area being used. The fee is \$15 for the Hornet Sports Center and \$5 for the gym, cafeteria, kitchen, library, auditorium and grounds, regardless of electricity use. The usage fee for a classroom is \$2.50. Groups that would have to pay all three fees include elected officials or other groups conducting meetings related to political campaigns, churches intending to use facilities for programs that are not solely youth serving, entities conducting for-profit activities, including programs that are sponsored by parks and recreation and non-profit community service groups that do not qualify for the waiver. The waiver allows a facility administrator, likely a principal, to waive the usage fee one time if the group provides other consideration, such as a donation to the school or division,

scholarships or other benefits. The waiver has to be approved by the superintendent or designee.

The fees listed in the application are considerably less than originally discussed. The board reviewed fees for Spotsylvania County, the Orange Youth Sports Complex and other similar facilities.

A separate conversation will be held this spring for charges related to the public's use of the Hornet Sports Center and its accompanying grounds, such as the track and tennis courts. Currently, those recreation areas are open in the morning and afternoon for the public's use with a very nominal fee charged. The object of the conversation will be to make sure that program is paying for itself.