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Deal them out

Rec center enacts no pay, no play rule to raise funds, and some seniors call it quits

12:00 AM CST on Sunday, January 8, 2006

By DAVID FLICK / The Dallas Morning News

The weather outside the senior annex of the Marcus Recreation Center was sunny and unseasonably pleasant last week. Inside, manager Linda Strem faced a storm.



Photos by RANDY ELI GROTHE/DMN
Eleanor Vaughan plays duplicate bridge at the Marcus Recreation center in North Dallas, which recently was told it has to raise \$5,000 to ease a budget crunch.

Its epicenter was a small woven basket placed near the entrance where, under a new policy, senior citizens who want to participate in some center activities are expected to toss in 50 cents.

"Does that include bridge players?" Manny Dubinski asked her.

"Yes," Ms. Strem replied. The center has to generate \$5,000 to ease a budget crunch in the city's Park and Recreation Department, which runs the center, she said.

"Well, I'm not going to pay it," Mr. Dubinski told her.

"And I'm not coming here anymore for bridge."

Elsewhere in the northwest Dallas senior center, indignation was the order of the day.

Many seniors said that, as taxpayers, they shouldn't have to pay extra if they want to play bridge or bingo.

Others noted that such activities remain free at other city centers.

"It isn't that we're all cheap," said Gennie Figel, a center volunteer. "Fifty cents isn't going to kill us.

"It's the principle of the thing. If they charge us, they should have to charge everybody equally."

Assistant park director Dave Strueber said all city recreation centers are being required to find ways to generate funds in the coming year to avoid layoffs, cutbacks or shorter operating hours.

Most of the others, he noted, were able to generate funds indirectly, such as with concession receipts, facility rentals and private donations.

But such methods are not as readily available to a small center like the Marcus annex, he said. He emphasized that the center hadn't imposed the fees just to fatten its coffers.

"It's not revenue generation," he said. "It's cost recovery."

Other means are being used to find the \$5,000, including raising the price of center lunches from \$2 to \$3.

Of the \$5,000, the 50 cent activity fee is intended to raise about \$2,000, which Mr. Strueber said is needed to offset the cost of providing free coffee.

Some seniors at the center agreed with the decision.

"Paying 50 cents seems to me to be very reasonable," Rick Brandenburg said.

"If you play at a studio, it's \$7," said Max Frey, his bridge partner.

But Fern Lank said not everyone is taking the fees lying down. Mrs. Lank, the chief organizer of the effort to build the center four years ago, is among the strongest opponents of the new fee.

"We had two tables for bridge on Tuesday. We used to have three or even four," she said. Bingo attendance has also dropped, she contended.

"It's caused a lot of frustration around here," she said.

"People wonder why we have to pay to use this center when we've already paid our taxes."

Mr. Strueber acknowledged that the situation could have been handled better.

"Maybe we could have addressed these things a little differently and told people this is what it costs to run this place and asked for their help," he said.

Nonetheless, the fees will stay, he said.

"We're going to stick with it," he said. "Basically, I don't see how we can yield. It's about using taxpayers' money."

He offered a compromise: "I'll make this offer. If we can find someone to give \$2,000 for the coffee, the fee goes away."

Mrs. Lank said no one mentioned to her that the fee was tied to the cost of coffee.

"If that's the problem, then I'll bring in a pound of coffee," she said. "But I'm going to bring in decaf, because that's the kind I drink."



NEWS [Local News](#)

End to the ante: Senior fee shelved

Dallas: Center's activity charge to raise funds drew criticism

12:00 AM CST on Sunday, January 15, 2006

By DAVID FLICK / The Dallas Morning News

Peace has returned to the card tables at a northwest Dallas senior citizens center.

After receiving pledges of \$3,000 – and three donated cans of coffee – the city has suspended a 50-cent activity fee for at least two years at the senior annex of the Marcus Recreation Center.

The Dallas Park and Recreation Department, which runs the center, imposed the fee last month, raising the ire of some senior citizens, especially bridge and bingo players. They objected to paying for an activity that other centers provided for free.

Center officials said the fee was needed to cover the \$2,000 cost to provide free coffee. That cost is part of \$5,000 that center officials have to recover this year to help ease a budget crunch.

Fern Lank, an opponent of the fee, said Thursday that rescinding it would bring back many seniors who had threatened never to play cards there again.

The fee suspension was announced after a Dallas senior citizen, who read about the fee in a Jan. 8 *Dallas Morning News* story, offered to donate \$2,000.

Other pledges totaled \$1,000, center manager Linda Strem said.

"And we also had people bring in three cans of coffee," she said.