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Council links fees to income

Costs for some to use public recreational facilities going up

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Scott Epstein had the same reaction as many of his neighbors when he learned Las Vegas will soon charge him more for services at his local community center because he lives in a more affluent area.

"These are public facilities, right?" Epstein said as he stood outside the Veterans Memorial Leisure Services Center in Summerlin. "Then they should treat all the residents the same. I don't think it's fair."

Fair or not, beginning in April, Epstein and his neighbors will begin paying 15 percent more for fitness memberships, classes and slots in city sports leagues, the City Council decided unanimously on Wednesday.

Centers in Las Vegas' highest income areas, those that like Epstein's Summerlin neighborhood have average annual incomes over \$50,000, will see the steepest increases, 15 percent on most services. They include Veterans Memorial and Cimarron Rose community centers.

Community centers in areas with incomes between \$35,001 and \$50,000, which includes the Mirabelli community center, will see increases of 10 percent.

Centers in the city's lower income neighborhoods, which include the Stupak, Rafael Rivera, Doolittle and West community centers, will see no increases.

"We've got a variety and diversity in economic levels in Las Vegas," Leisure Services Director Barbara Jackson told the council. "We've tried to come up with something more equitable."

Two exceptions to the tiered fee increase are the city's Safe Key after-school programs and aquatics programs, which will increase at centers citywide.

Jackson said the increases are needed for the city to keep pace with the growing cost of providing the programs. Las Vegas hasn't increased its charge for the Safe Key program since the mid-1990s.

Officials estimate the higher fees, which will bring in an additional \$600,000 a year, will allow the city

to continue covering 35 percent of the cost of its leisure programs.

Steven Frates, senior fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, Calif., said in his 25 years studying local government he knows of only a few instances in which a municipality has divided its population based on income and charged different prices for essentially the same service.

"It's cumbersome and there are strong questions whether it does what it's purported to do," he said. "It reflects an odd view that people define themselves by class and income."

But city officials insist there is precedent, citing a county community center that at one time provided services free of charge.

"The notion that variable pricing is avant-garde is untrue," Jackson said. "I think we're different in the sense we have established a range and been public about it."

Dorothy Wright, Clark County's cultural program administrator, said Clark County at one time allowed community centers to set their own rates. One center chose to charge nothing for a time, she said.

But because of complaints from citizens that the system was unfair, the county systematically standardized its recreation fees and offset the cost to low income residents using grants, Wright said.

The city plans to offer scholarships and subsidies for those unable to afford the higher fees.

Councilwoman Lynette Boggs McDonald said she concluded the city should charge more in her district after reviewing a study comparing two Las Vegas recreation centers, one operated by the city and the other under a contract with the YMCA.

While residents were equally satisfied with service at both centers, the YMCA charged on average \$429 for annual memberships, while the city-run facility charged only \$120.

"We can't continue on a path that one size fits all," she said, noting the price difference in the more affluent areas doesn't amount to much. "It's coming down to \$3 or \$5 (for a daily fitness fee). That equals two Happy Meals."

Bill Thompson, a public administration professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, said he believes it's appropriate for the city to charge different rates because leisure programs are nonessential services.

"It's the areas of less wealth that need these city's services," he said. "I don't think the rich people should complain unless they're paying more than it would cost at a private club."

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