



Corporate donors keep North Andover school sports fees down Sponsorship program raised \$42,000

(By Crystal Bozek cbozek@eagletribune.com December 21, 2008)

NORTH ANDOVER — Christopher Nobile didn't figure his job description would include salesman when he joined the North Andover School Committee last spring. But that's all he's done for the past three months, cold-calling businesses, giving his pitch and carrying fliers around town, trying to get companies to advertise at the high school's Walsh Stadium. Some doubted whether a business would pay \$5,000 for a banner and a couple of announcements over the loudspeaker at a football game. But Nobile was going to try, because with a \$39,000 athletic program deficit, sports fees for some students were set to go up by more than \$100 otherwise.

Three months and 16 sponsors later, the School Committee has raised \$42,500 from its new sponsorship program — enough to cover the deficit and funnel some money to the town for playing field upgrades.

North Andover showed that just as professional teams seek corporate advertisers, so can a school district. "It was a great surprise to see all the support," said Nobile, who does corporate lending for a bank as a day job. "Most people who contributed to the program said, 'Don't spend the money on a banner.' ... That's why you don't see as many out there."

With Nobile leading the program, the School Committee ended up picking up sponsors like McDonald's, Pentucket Medical, Sovereign Bank, Wheelabrator Technologies and even an anonymous donor. Six banners hang at the football stadium and inside the gymnasium.

Back in the summer, the School Committee voted to keep the fee to play a single sport at \$300, but voted to raise the amount to play a second sport from \$50 to \$175. The fee cap for families rose from \$600 to \$775.

But committee members said they would withdraw the increases if enough money could be raised. Going after outside funding is a change for the School Committee, which had a policy against accepting corporate or business advertising for sports program. The committee voted to waive the rules and allow sponsorships at its Aug. 19 meeting. Haverhill is the only other local school district that displays advertisements at an athletic facility, and they use the sponsorship dollars for stadium upkeep.

Parent Valerie Reading, co-president of the North Andover Athletic Association, said she was happy to hear the School Committee succeeded. Having a junior in two sports, she knows how expensive things get already. "There are the fees, but there are also other expenses. He signed up for swimming, so there's buying the swimsuit. In gymnastics, you have to get the leotard," she said. "Nobody likes to see the fees, but nobody likes to see the athletic program cut back either. I'm happy they kept the cost down."

Nobile said the schools got a lot more than money from the deal. In one case, Pentucket Medical offered free physicals to North Andover High athletes. All high school athletes need physicals to play.

John Sarro, CEO of Pentucket Medical, said sponsoring high school sports was a way to help out the community, support fitness initiatives and benefit from some innovative advertising. "Chris called me one day, out of the blue, like a cold sales call," said Sarro, laughing. "He was very aggressive. His approach was this could be a win-win arrangement."

Nobile said with more than 13,000 people attending North Andover High football games, plus thousands more at youth sports league events, potential advertisers were listening. He presented his plan to dozens of other school districts at a recent Massachusetts School Committees conference and hopes North Andover will serve as a model for others in the same situation. Nobile said he already knows he'll be doing this again. "I'll let everyone catch a breather first, but yes, I'm looking forward to doing this next year," he said. "We'll have the same kind of needs, maybe greater."

ATHLETIC SPONSORS

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