

The Saints are marching again on Newmarket

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But instead of the former American Hockey League team that operated for five seasons in Newmarket until the early 1990s, it is an Ontario Lacrosse Association Junior B franchise that will face off next spring at the Ray Twinney Complex.

A group of Newmarket investors has combined with present owner Rick Fitchett to move the Scarborough Saints to the Ray Twinney Complex for the 2008 season.

“Our goal is to make a premium franchise and, with the resources we have, I think we can do that,” said Mr. Fitchett, a Markham businessperson who will retain part ownership and his role as general manager.

The OLA’s junior council provided its approval Friday at its annual general meeting in Niagara Falls.

Mr. Fitchett took ownership of the Saints five years ago to save it from disbanding. Moving to Newmarket, where a thriving youth program, the Redbirds, and off-floor team of volunteers apparently awaits, was the logical move to save it again.

“I love the sport and have put too much into it to fold it,” the 54-year-old Scarborough resident said. “The level of enthusiasm (in Newmarket) is fantastic.”

Newmarket last was home to a junior lacrosse team in 1955 when the storied Green Gaels franchise played at the Newmarket Community Centre.

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The last junior program in the area was the now-defunct Aurora Stallions, which operated in the 1980s.

But the opportunity to bring in a listing Saints franchise to top off a thriving minor program was too tempting to pass up.

“It’s a franchise which didn’t have an infrastructure, but with a number of Newmarket players on its roster,” said Jack Hurst, one of the investors. “We hope to bring something to the table and to the local population that would like to see lacrosse in the community. We want to be a solid representative and place to play for local kids.”

Other local investors include Earl Rothery and Mike Ham.

About 550 players registered in the Newmarket Redbirds house league and rep box lacrosse programs up to the intermediate level. In addition, the Redbirds field lacrosse program includes another 100 registered players.

“We’ve been working off-and-on for the last two years to bring (in) junior lacrosse,” said Redbirds’ president Stew Beatty. “This has made it very exciting for the Redbirds organization.

“It’s a good relationship between the minor program and the junior club, as it should be.”

Beatty, who will serve as assistant GM for the Saints, pointed out one of the key factors is the presence of a solid youth program to serve as a feeder to the junior level.

In fact, the Redbirds has been the largest youth lacrosse program in Ontario without a junior team, Beatty said. Under league rules, players competing for other teams have a one-time opportunity to return to their home centres.

“There’s no question this will be good for the (Redbirds),” Beatty said. “When you have a junior team to aspire to, it heightens the interest level.

“We have so many kids leaving to play elsewhere because there are teams all around us. Now we can go to them and say come home to play.”

The league consists of 26 teams across the province, with a 20-game schedule running from mid-April to late June, plus playoffs, and is one step below the elite Major Junior A level.

Last season, the Saints finished last in the five-team Mid-East Division of the 13-team Eastern Conference with a 7-13 record.

The division also includes teams in Barrie, Markham, Clarington and Huntsville.

League commissioner Dave Vernon could not be reached for comment.