



Robert Morris may build boathouse for its rowers, others

April 14, 2011 5:20 am

By Linda Wilson Fuoco / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Robert Morris University is proposing to build a rowing boathouse along the Ohio River at its Island Sports Center on Neville Island.

University officials will discuss their plans from 6 to 8 p.m. next Thursday in the Hat Trick Club in the sports center on Grant Avenue, adjacent to the Coraopolis Bridge on the western end of the island.

The boathouse could be used by the 36 women on the Robert Morris rowing team and members of the public, including high school rowing teams.

"We are really in the exploratory stages," said Craig Coleman, director of athletics at Robert Morris. "Our rowing team needs a new home. At the same time, the rowing community is growing and could use a facility to store shells and rent shells. We could help meet community needs."

"We are exploring funding. We have met with an architect and the firm should have some visuals" for the public meeting, he said.

The university sent out 10,000 invitations to the public hearing, said Don Smith, associate vice president for institutional advancement.

"We are looking for places to connect," including high school rowing teams and adults who regularly row and compete. "We could meet the demands" of the community while also taking in "some potential revenue," Mr. Smith said. "We're trying to gauge the level of interest."

Robert Morris has had a women's rowing team since 1997. Members train year-round, rowing outside on the Ohio River and practicing inside at the Island Sports Center when the river is too high and too fast for safe rowing.

The team has 10 boats, or shells made of aluminum, and nowhere to store them, said coach Midge McPhail. "Our boats are not under cover."

The varsity rowing team also does not have a dock for getting their boats into and out of the water.

But there is a dock next to the Island Sports Center. Boaters use the dock to go bowling at Paradise Island Bowl, and that facility allows the university rowers to use their dock.

Ms. McPhail is effusive in her praise of rowing on the Ohio River.

"It's a big, beautiful, strong river," she said. "Having rowed on many rivers, I am able to say it's cleaner than many rivers."

The team is usually out on the river at 6:15 a.m. and often rows till 9 a.m.

The height of the river and the speed of the currents are monitored. Currently the river is too high and too fast for safe rowing, so the women are inside using rowing machines and other workout equipment, she said.

The Ohio River near Neville Island is challenging for rowers, with swift currents and commercial traffic, include large barges that generate big wakes, Ms. McPhail said.

"We use walkie-talkies to communicate with the barges" to find out where they are and where they are headed. The commercial boat and barge operators are very nice and very helpful, Ms. McPhail said.

She attended Ohio State University on a rowing scholarship. After graduating with a degree in psychology, she was an assistant coach on Ohio State's rowing team before coming to Robert Morris five years ago to become head coach. At that, time there were 13 women on the team. Now the roster counts 36.

While the team has always competed as an independent, this year it became an associate member of the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference, permitting it to compete for the first time for an NCAA championship.

On Sunday the team will be competing in the conference championship at Mercer Lake in West Windsor, N.J.

The Island Sports Center opened in 1998; the university has owned it since 2003. The facilities that sprawl over 32 acres are home to many of the school's NCAA Division I teams -- rowing, hockey and track and field.

The existing facilities are also open to the public, including two indoor ice arenas, two outdoor multipurpose ice rinks, athletic fields, a domed golf driving range, a running track and a miniature golf course as well as banquet and meeting facilities.

The sports facilities host many premier athletic events, such as the USA Hockey National Championships, Junior Olympic Figure Skating Championships and the National Short Track Speedskating Championship.

At the meeting next Thursday, refreshments will be served, including wine and cheese from The Naked Grape Wine Bistro of Sewickley.

To RSVP or for information, call 412-397-4913.

Linda Wilson Fuoco: lfuoco@post-gazette.com or 412-722-0087.

First Published 2012-03-14 22:59:44