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Edmonton reviews naming rights policy

IF YOU WANT TO PURCHASE THE name of a city-owned building in Edmonton, be prepared to jump through hoops.

It's puzzling. More than any Canadian city its size, Edmonton has established a reputation as a welcoming and efficient host for major international events and their sponsors. But it has a formal policy on the sale of naming rights that specifically forbids the active solicitation of naming partners. If a company, unbidden, comes knocking, the city might consider it.

"They haven't been exactly beating down our doors with requests to name our facilities," says Gary Dewar, Edmonton's Sales and Sponsorship Supervisor and the man now leading a gentle push to have the shackles loosened ever so slightly.

The current policy, which dates back to 1999, also requires that Dewar first obtain "concept approval" from council before proceeding with negotiations with an unsolicited partner. Public consultation must demonstrate public support for the name sale. And the prospective partner must be squeaky-clean: not make any money from tobacco, products that are harmful or destructive to the environment, be committed to good environmental practices, be a good boss to its employees, and do business only in countries that promote racial equality.

It's an unusually restrictive policy, says Deborah Wilson, Senior Partner with Toronto's Performance Sponsorship Group, an agency with a strong record for naming rights sales.

"I've seen some policy that would make it difficult, but by-and-large the idea is not to make it difficult," she says. Good policy, she suggests, is one that protects municipal assets while allowing the development of partnerships that make sense.

In Edmonton, with plans afoot to build several new parks and recreation facilities, and a desire to make them as good as they possibly can be, Dewar is hoping municipal council will give him the freedom to sell, not just entertain offers that may drift his way.

Municipal politicians are still wary. Dewar took his proposal to the community services committee of municipal council, which gave him the go-ahead only to test the public mood. He expects a public consultation process to happen over the next month, and he'll take the results back to council.

Resistance to corporate naming of municipal buildings in Edmonton seems to trace to legacy projects. In any discussion, it seems, Commonwealth Stadium will be referenced. It was a proposal to name the city-owned venue, built in 1978 to host the Commonwealth Games, that gave rise to the current policy. There is no appetite to see it renamed.

Dewar doesn't want to influence the debate, but his gut tells him that residents and councillors will be more amenable to the sale of naming rights to new inventory. After all, the city has had no difficulty accepting a corporate presence on buildings built, in part, with public funds, such as the Shaw Convention Centre, Rexall Place, and baseball's Telus Field.