



# STEFAN I. MYCHAJLIW

## ERIE COUNTY COMPTROLLER

December 30, 2020

Commissioner Howard A. Zucker, MD  
New York State Department of Health  
Corning Tower - Empire State Plaza  
Albany, NY 12237

Dear Dr. Zucker,

Here in Erie County, we are a hockey hotbed. Youth ice hockey is an integral part of our community. For thousands of families, the sport provides much-needed exercise, discipline, and team building for athletes. Pre-COVID our rinks were packed daily. We welcomed teams from around the state and globe to play here. Players, organizations, and ice rinks struggle with facing continued shutdowns and restrictions.

Mr. Kyle Jackson from Williamsville, New York summed up the feeling of many "hockey parents" in Erie County when he shared the frustration of his child not being able to play: *"I have a senior daughter who's missing out on her greatest and probably last year she will ever play. It makes me physically ill."*

Our county budget and the local economy lost millions of dollars in revenue with youth ice hockey leagues being shut down. Families are not traveling here to spend money on hotels, motels, restaurants, and stores.

In April 2021, Tier One boys teams from USA Hockey are scheduled to travel to Erie County to play a 32-team tournament with two divisions of players, ages 16-to-18. The weeklong tournament is expected to bring families from across the country to our area. The positive economic impact ranges anywhere from \$5 million to \$15 million depending on COVID-19 restrictions. The economic impact will be \$0 if the ice hockey tournament is forced to cancel.

No doubt though the biggest loss is not financial. It is the loss being felt by children and young adults who cannot lace up their skates and play.

Recognizing that other sports have been allowed to resume play, I would strongly urge that New York State, under your guidance, re-examine the "Reopening New York Sports and Recreation Guidelines," to allow ice hockey to return to scrimmages and games. I very respectfully ask you to lift current restrictions to allow youth scrimmages, games, and leagues to resume.

NYS Office of Mental Health recognizes that COVID-19 is causing anxiety, especially in children and young adults. It is recommended that kids are provided safe outlets to stay connected with friends, get exercise, and maintain some semblance of normalcy.

Youth hockey has always been a revenue driver for not only our region, but throughout New York State. Two major events in Rochester alone generated \$2,673,687 in economic impact through attendees, lodging, transportation, food & beverage, retail, recreation, space rental, and other services provided. These tournaments were not held in 2020. This is a massive amount of lost positive economic impact for a region.

According to the NYSAHA, statewide hockey tournament losses in 2020 were over \$4,000,000 with over 7,910 people impacted. We have entered the heart of ice hockey season. If we do not allow youth hockey to resume over the next

few months, the NYSAHA estimates another \$4,500,000 in lost revenue. Sanctioned events under the NYSAHA banner in New York typically ranges from 200-275 in various locations across NYS. This year there were zero.

Across our great state there are typically over 70,000 people involved in NYSAHA as players, coaches, referees, and volunteers, all of whom are being directly negatively impacted by this shut down. This year registration is down 27%.

Allowing these youths to play will be a mental and emotional boost to their well-being, while also providing a much-needed shot in the arm to the local economy with hotel room bookings, dining in local restaurants and shopping.

Fully opening ice hockey leagues would also clear up confusion concerning existing New York State guidelines and how they are being inconsistently enforced here in Erie County. The Erie County Department of Health shut down Holiday Twin Rinks on Friday, December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020, for allegedly hosting an ice hockey scrimmage:

“An Erie County Department of Health public health sanitarian inspected Holiday Twin Rinks in Cheektowaga on Friday night and observed a hockey scrimmage, which is not currently allowed under NY Forward Sports and Recreation guidance.”

Source: [www.erie.gov/health](http://www.erie.gov/health), “Erie County Department of Health Statement on Close Order Issued to Local Sports Facility, 12/19/20

On the morning of December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz went to the Northtown Center at Amherst to skate, shoot hockey pucks and share the same ice with anywhere from 4 to 14 other hockey players. He is clearly playing hockey. If he were “just skating” there would be no need to carry a stick in his hands. Video downloaded from the streaming service “Live Barn” shows that a full ice hockey scrimmage commenced. The County Executive did not notify his Health Department that a scrimmage took place, no Health Inspectors showed up and the rink could remain open, unlike Holiday Twin Rinks. Your NYS guidelines are being enforced at some rinks and not at others.

Let me be clear: I support the playing of ice hockey at all rinks across New York State, whether it is an informal adult “beer” league, certified youth hockey organization or scrimmages like the one Mr. Poloncarz engaged in on Sunday, December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Children and adults alike should have the same opportunity that County Executive Poloncarz and his mates had. Please let kids play hockey. Open youth sports. Loosen restrictions on rinks. Simply put: let them play.

Just recently we saw numerous court rulings supporting the relaxation or elimination of COVID restrictions favoring salons, gyms, restaurants, and bars. I urge you to please review the guidelines to bring all youth sports back, especially ice hockey, before more litigation commences.

Sincerely,



STEFAN I. MYCHAJLIW  
Erie County Comptroller

CC: Hon. Andrew M. Cuomo  
Hon. Mark C. Poloncarz, Erie County Executive  
Hon. Brian Kulpa, Supervisor, Town of Amherst  
Commissioner Gale R. Burstein, MD, ECDOH  
Members of the NYS Assembly and Senate  
Ms. Janice Cavaretta, WNYAHL Executive Director, USA  
Hockey Registrar NY  
Mr. Chris Roswell, Leisure Rinks General Manager  
Mr. Mark Grundtisch, Holiday Twin Rinks General  
Manager / Pepsi Tourney Director  
Mr. Nick Price, North Buffalo Rink Manager

Ms. Heather Warnke, Buffalo River Works GM  
Mr. Charlie Mendola, Assistant General Manager –  
LECOM Harborcenter  
Mr. Mike Baio, Bud Bakewell Ice Rink  
Mr. Scott More, Classic Rink General Manager  
Mr. Gary Joseph, West Section President for NYSAHA  
Ms. Amy Rogers, Alternate West Section President for  
NYSAHA  
Mr. Rich Michalczak, Local Supervisor for NYSAHA  
Mr. Joe Baudo, President/USAH Director for NYSAHA