

Ice rink scores with Business of the Month award

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By FRED POLLARD

EAST ALTON - Freezing out the competition, the East Alton Ice Arena was chosen as the River Bend Growth Association Business of the Month for January.

"We really appreciate the businesses in the area who have recognized the arena for what it does for the community," general manager Larry Thatcher said. "We enjoy our relationship with the RBGA and participate in the activities and in-services it provides."

The East Alton Ice Arena opened on Oct. 6, 1995, operated by husband-and-wife team Larry and Paula Thatcher and assistant manager Dan Svezia.

"All three of us have been there since the beginning," Paula said. "Our kids have grown up at the rink, and Dan's have, also."

Larry Thatcher said 11 local businessmen completed a feasibility study in 1992, and the village of East Alton showed an interest in the possibility of a rink.

"I was sitting at my desk at Shell, and I contacted Tom Lakin about my idea to open a rink for the River Bend area," he said. "The first meeting with the businessmen was on July 22, 1992. It did not look like something that would be a profitable private venture, but still something the River Bend area really needed.

"I am very grateful for the people involved who had the foresight to put this all together."

The arena, boasting a 15,800-square-foot ice surface, is owned by the village and is managed by a nonprofit corporation, surviving solely on the income it generates.

"The current economy is our biggest hardship," Larry said. "When people can't pay the power bill then something has to give, and recreation dollars are the first to go."

Operated by East Alton Civic Rink Management Inc., no tax dollars go into the facility, and income is supplemented by ice sales, the pro shop and the concession area, offering an assortment of candy, burgers, nachos, hot dogs and other treats to help warm up chilly skaters.

"We see a variety of customers at the pro shop," assistant manager Dan Svezia said. "We had one guy come in that uses hockey pucks to create furniture. He bought 200 pucks from us because he said he could not find them cheaper anywhere else."

In spite of the financial challenges and a drop from 50 employees in 1995 to about 20 today, Thatcher said the rink has managed to thrive and continues to be an asset to the area.

"We pride ourselves in the cleanliness of the facility and our ability to maintain the building on a very, very limited budget," he said. "This gives people a reason to 'drive to,' not 'drive through,' East Alton. We have had players from European countries that have come here to play."

Thatcher sits on the board of directors for the Mississippi Valley Club High School Hockey Association and the Mid-American Collegiate Hockey Association, and also serves as the general manager of the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Cougar Hockey Club, where he served as head coach for 11 years. He also serves as a member of the East Alton Library Board.

He said rather than compete with other arenas and organizations, working together can only help to foster relationships and build a stronger sense of community.

"We embrace our competition," he said. "I have formed a loose association of Mississippi Valley Rink managers, and we meet several times each year to share ideas, problems, new products and programs. In this business it is more important to stand together than it is to be alone."

The East Alton Ice Arena, home to the East Alton Skating Academy and the Twin Bridges Hockey Association, the Mississippi Valley Club High School Hockey Association and the Madison County Hockey Club, provides open ice skating, hockey stick and puck time for adults and children, skating lessons, and event planning such as birthday parties, corporate events and more.

For information, call (618) 254-7465 or visit the website at www.eastaltonicearena.org.

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