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KALAMAZOO COUNTY

'Hockey is family': Parents concerned by Wings West sale to Black Bear

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TEXAS TOWNSHIP, Mich. (WOOD) — Concerns over higher ice fees, equipment restrictions, and possible rebranding are worrying parents of Kalamazoo youth hockey players as Maryland-based Black Bear Sports Group takes ownership of Wings West.



The complex of two ice rinks [closed in September](#) after staff members said the ice plant suffered a severe failure. Maintenance was underway since the summer to try and fix the problem to no avail. Then Black Bear along in October.

[New owners say Wings West ice rink complex will reopen for 2026-27 season](#)

The private company founded by Murry Gunty in 2015 owns arenas in 11 states, including Michigan. The purchase came with commitments to renovate the facility, with up to \$2 million allocated for the effort, including the overhaul of the refrigeration system.

But the news wasn't the change some parents were hoping for.

"We've been to these Black Bear rinks. It's not the saving grace that, you know, younger parents or parents of younger children like me might have thought it would be," said Faye Davis, a Kalamazoo Optimist Hockey Association board member and the parent of two youth hockey players.

"When we're not at the rink for their hockey, we are at Western Games. If we're not at a Western game, we're at a K-Wings game. If we're not at a K-Wings game, we're going to Red Wings games. Hockey is life for us, so it's very important to keep it local, to keep it affordable," she told News 8.

Wings West is home to KOHA and several other ice groups. While transition talks are between KOHA administrators and Black Bear, the board and parents are worried about what could come.

“Now as the plans start rolling out, there’s the talk of, no matter what happens, there’s going to be solid rates, like ice rate increases, which inevitably trickle down to the cost that parents pay for hockey,” said Davis.

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She said ice rentals are being reduced from 60 to 50 minutes, while prices rise, along with the cost for group lockers. Davis said the change feels heavy-handed.

“The rates that we’ve seen have been inclusive of some sort of like force rebrand, which I think is corporate bullying because Black Bear bought a building, not a club,” she said.

Davis isn’t alone in those concerns. Hockey parent and KOHA Board VP, Chris Buckley, said the transition could end fundraising efforts, like a memorial golf outing dedicated to young players. He added that tournament opportunities may also be curbed under a new structure.

“USA Hockey and KOHA have a great relationship. Kalamazoo has hosted the 14 and under USA Nationals for twice. And with Black Bear here, that is in jeopardy,” he said.

The program previously said in April that **nearly \$2 million was generated in the Kalamazoo area** as a result of this year’s tournament. Buckley worries a new Wings West ownership may also drive money away from local businesses.

“KOHA has always been community-first. Through hockey supply shops, through our apparel vendors, through even local photographers who come to tournaments and games and photograph games. All of that money would leave the community with Black Bear and they would be forced to use their own vendors,” he said.

Black Bear owns six other rinks in Michigan, four of which bear the Biggby Coffee branding. In a statement, a spokesperson says the group is in the preliminary stages of plans to reopen Wings West and no decisions have been made on ice time, fundraising or otherwise.

“We remain solely focused on revitalizing and reopening the rink which, without the partnership of Black Bear, would remain permanently closed,” they said.

They reiterated the investment commitments geared to reopen **Wings West by the 2026-2027 season**.

“Like many of our other Black Bear rinks, Wings West has long been a cornerstone for the local community, and we are so excited to save this vibrant sports hub,” Black Bear said. “Our partnership, commitment and work will ensure that local hockey players and figure skaters will continue to have a place on the ice to call home.”

As this transition takes place, KOHA and other ice user groups are part of a [feasibility study with Discover Kalamazoo](#) to learn more about the ice rink needs in the area and how to meet it.

“Hockey is family,” Buckley said. “I don’t want anyone coming in and messing with our family like this. And so I think it’s important to speak out against corporate bullying. A private equity firm out of Maryland bought a building. They didn’t buy an organization.”

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