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Private sports club returns to public parks

Re-formation draws familiar criticism from watchdog groups

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Left for dead a few months ago, the for-profit Chicago Sport and Social Club, one of the largest users of Chicago parks, opened its summer volleyball season this week.

Park advocates and officials praise the 65,000-member group for luring young adults into volleyball, softball, football and other leagues. But some watchdog groups question whether the group makes it more difficult for neighborhood residents to use the parks and are wary of turning over dozens of playing fields to a group that charges for membership and exists to make money.

"We're concerned that there might be too much use of public land by a private group," said Myer Blank, director of policy analysis for the Civic Federation. "The public should feel comfortable coming and using these facilities."

Park officials praise the club and smaller ones like it for easing access to park facilities for people who often use the parks more as a place to work out and less as a field for meeting neighbors. They also say the club helps keep up and renovate playing fields, including the popular North Avenue Beach volleyball areas.

"What they bring is a structure and an overall organizing principle to meet the needs of a lot of young people in the city," parks General Supt. David Doig said.

"We definitely bring new people to the parks and capture a new, active group by going out and doing aggressive marketing, something the Park District's never done," said Jason Erkes, the Chicago club's president.

"We only use the parks and the fields for three hours a day, not all day."

Rising from its beginnings in Chicago more than a decade ago, the Sport and Social Club of the U.S. had established 17 local affiliates nationwide before StreetZebra.com, a California sports-oriented Web site, bought the concern last year. Most of the club's affiliates closed in January after StreetZebra.com went bankrupt, and a group of Chicago members bought the clubs in Chicago, Detroit and San Francisco the next month.

Some people at Tuesday's opening volleyball night were glad the group has been revived, and they cared little about its making a profit from park facilities.

"If they're the ones that want to organize it, then I'm glad they do," said Betsy Gehart of Chicago.

The president of the Lincoln Park Advisory Council said the only problem she sees with the group is how busy it makes North Avenue Beach.

"It makes it a little difficult getting along the lakefront in the evening," Vickie Matthews said. But she added: "They seem to all be young fun-loving people. I've not seen drinking. I've not seen any type of refuse. I think they police themselves quite well."