Basketball court costs change location

By Chuck Rupnow
Leader-Telegram staff

There's apparently one main reason Thursday night's WIAA Division 2 boys basketball game between two of the state's top teams was at UW-Stout rather than UW-Eau Claire - the cost.

But there may have been some misunderstanding or confusion about rental costs that might have kept the game in Eau Claire, which would have benefited the university and local businesses.

An estimated 2,300 people packed Johnson Fieldhouse in Menomonie for the much-anticipated match-up between the state's top-ranked teams from Rice Lake and Onalaska.

Eau Claire Memorial High School was the game host and was scheduled to have the game at its gym, which holds 1,500. School officials realized the status of the game and high ticket demand and began looking at larger venues, including UW-Eau Claire's Zorn Arena, which seats 2,400, and UW-Stout.

Sue Steffes, associate principal and athletic director at Memorial, said the school would have preferred to have the game at UW-Eau Claire for convenience and community reasons, but said it was economically more feasible to have the game at UW-Stout.

The WIAA gets a percentage of the ticket sales.

"We have to operate in the black," Steffes said Friday, declining to go into detail about estimates and communications she had with UW-Eau Claire officials. "It was more economical to have the game at Stout."

As it turns out, there may have been some confusion about rental costs at UW-Eau Claire, which, according to some sources, could have neared $8,000. Total costs at Stout will be around $1,400.

Jason Anderson, event production coordinator for UW-Eau Claire, initially said Friday that he recalled emails with Steffes, estimating rental costs ranging between $2,700 and $3,200.

After calculating numbers for a 5-hour block, custodial and other fees, Anderson later said the rental cost would have been $1,708 for Zorn Arena, and possibly $420 more for police services.
Anderson said there may have been some confusion about the event, including the number of hours needed and other services, and said he did not quote Steffes an exact amount.

The $8,000 figure came from a possible $2.50 or $2.75 surcharge by UW-Eau Claire on each ticket, along with rental costs, but Anderson said the university would not have had a surcharge because Memorial would have been handling the ticketing.

"We would have loved to have had the game at Zorn," Anderson said. "We are trying to do our best to host more events to hold the community and campus in the best light possible."

Lori Anda, director of UW-Stout's sports and fitness center, said Friday that Memorial will be charged $125 an hour for Johnson Fieldhouse, along with charges for custodial, staff and police, amounting to about $1,400.

"We enjoy hosting events because it provides students and parents an opportunity to showcase our facilities and campus," she said. "We think people walked away thinking how smoothly things went and will come here again."

WIAA Associate Director Deb Hauser declined Friday to discuss rental costs or relocations, saying the WIAA needed to maintain a good relationship with all schools and possible venues.

Linda John, executive director of Eau Claire Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, said Friday that an estimated $100,000 to $150,000 would have been spent in the city by fans who attended the game.

"That's money that businesses in Menomonie likely got that Eau Claire did not," she said. "It would have been nice to have it here."

Rupnow can be reached at 715-830-5831, 800-236-7077 or chuck.rupnow@ecpc.com.