

21 July 2010

Re: Seattle Times Article: "Area's aging public swimming pools running on empty"

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing in response to the article published on July 20th in the Seattle Times entitled the "Area's aging public swimming pools running on empty." It's a well-written article that expresses the situation for aquatics in our region. It is clear that what our citizens invested in over 40 years ago has been a good investment, but that it wasn't an indefinite one. The region's swimming pools have been an asset to several generations of swimmers and may, for that matter, be taken for granted. We are now at a point that our citizens need to decide if they are willing to re-up this investment or do without.

Many of these facilities have been well maintained and even had significant overhauls during the past 40 years; however, they continually become increasingly expensive to maintain and operate as the infrastructure ages. The financial burden to cities and other supporters of the pools has reached a critical point, especially in these current economic times.

I have been working with many of our region's communities on exactly this issue for several years now as these Forward Thrust Pools reach the end of their life. I represent ORB Architects, a Renton architecture firm that specializes in aquatic facility planning, assessment, and design. My professional experience reflects exactly what is stated in your article about the public desire and need for public swimming facilities.

I've hosted several dozen public meetings in the last couple of years all over Washington State that have clearly shown a desire and need for public swimming opportunities. As your article alluded, the difference between this generation and that of the Forward Thrust era is that we are moving away from the "square box" type lap pool to a more active, inclusive, and versatile leisure pool concept.

In today's world, we need to be more cognizant of energy use, and other operational aspects in addition to attracting more users in order to make aquatic facilities more financially viable. One of the primary problems with the "square box" lap pool is that it is not as attractive to many of our user groups, including small children and seniors as it could be. The lap pool concept is geared towards competitive swimming. This could include water polo, synchronized swimming, and diving, (although often shut down for safety reasons). These pools are often used for aerobics, therapy and swim lessons as well, but with less-than-ideal conditions.

The versatility of things like zero-depth entries and lazy rivers allow a facility to expand programming to easily meet the desires of every citizen. If designed properly, a zero-depth entry offers a great way to teach young users how to swim by introducing them to the water gradually. It also can accommodate a wheelchair user who can do exercises and other activities in the buoyancy of water. The water's buoyancy also offers opportunities for physical therapy and low-impact exercises for recovery from injuries and seniors. Even the flow of water in the lazy river is used for resistance walking and strength building.

COMMUNITY INSPIRED ARCHITECTURE


I think that Metro Parks Tacoma is a good example of how to look at aquatics from a city-wide perspective to meet all the citizens' needs. Instead of always needing to have a lap pool, some aquatics needs are met with leisure pools instead. They've spread the needs throughout the city with places like Stewart Heights for a large leisure pool and Titlow Pool for lap swimming. In addition, they are gradually converting their old wading pools, located all around the city in different parks, into Spray Parks. Much of the funding for this is coming from a Parks Bond Measure that passed several years ago in which the city had a vision for city-wide parks improvements.

I also think it's very important to recognize the difference between a public swimming facility and the private ones that some people say is adequate to meet the need. For one thing, not everyone can afford memberships to these facilities. The mission of the parks and recreation districts often include words like "welcoming," "play," "learn," "safety," and "community." All of these statements can be met with public swimming pools.

It is clearly a challenge to come up with a way to fund these types of projects. Our leaders and our citizens need to have a vision that sells. For any measure such as a bond to pass it must receive a super-majority in our state. I can't tell you how often I hear that a measure to support parks and recreation facilities, such as pool, fails by getting just fewer than 60% of the vote. That's a majority result that most politicians would interpret as a landslide victory. It's a significant barrier. You just have to go to Portland, Oregon, or Vancouver, British Columbia, to see what our neighbors have been able to accomplish with current aquatic facilities. Washington does have the need for the same thing, but must be motivated to create the vision.

I just hope that we don't have to see all of our pools closed before it's realized.

Respectively Submitted,



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Principal