



Agenda Report

DATE: MARCH 8, 2010

TO: PARK, RECREATION AND OPEN SPACE COMMISSION

FROM: ARTS, RECREATION & COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT

SUBJECT: REVIEW OF WALNUT CREEK AQUATICS NEEDS ASSESSMENT

STATEMENT OF ISSUE:

The City of Walnut Creek's aquatics programs have long been a leader in the field by providing a range of programs from learn-to-swim to elite Olympic programs. The aquatic facilities have similarly served this community well since their construction 40 years ago. However, demands for swim programs have changed in the last 40 years, and the aging aquatic facilities are approaching the end of their useful service to the community. Recognizing this situation, the City funded an assessment to help plan for the future of these important community services. The study assessed the current condition of the City's aquatics programs and facilities, identified local and regional trends and demands, and presented program and facility options on how the City can meet these future needs. The Park, Recreation and Open Space Commission is asked to review the study's findings and recommendations to prepare for a formal recommendation to the City Council next month.

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

Commissioners are asked to review the findings and provide comments on the Walnut Creek Aquatics Needs Assessment Report's recommendations.

DISCUSSION:

The City of Walnut Creek once stood at the pinnacle of the aquatics world. Our facilities were jewels, our programs were envied, and our successes were unmatched. The City's commitment to aquatics is still strong and the programs remain robust, but after 40 years the City's facilities have lost their luster. Whether Walnut Creek should seek to regain its aquatics supremacy is a subjective matter, and is not the topic of this report. However, without significant changes to the facilities, our ability to provide even the most basic swim programs is at risk. To meet this challenge and to create the greatest opportunity for Walnut Creek to continue providing excellent programs well into the future, the City commissioned this needs assessment study.

Background

The City owns and operates two aquatic facilities: one located at Heather Farm Park, (the Clarke Memorial Swim Center), and the other located in the west side of the City at Larkey Park. The Clarke facility was designed and built in the early 1970s and houses three swimming pools: a 50-meter by 25-yard lap pool, a 60-foot by 30-foot wading pool, and a 82.5-foot by 46-foot diving pool. The facility is open year-round and also includes a 6,900 square foot bath house with a central reception area, separate men's and women's locker and shower facilities, a classroom, workout room and offices. Of the City's two aquatics centers, the Clarke facility serves as the regional hub.

The Larkey pool was designed and constructed in the late 1960s and comprises a 25-meter by 25-yard lap pool and associated 40-foot by 40-foot diving well. A round wading pool with a diameter of 17 feet is adjacent to the larger pool. The facility also includes a 3,400 square foot bath house. As a smaller, neighborhood facility, the Larkey pool serves the general public on a seasonal basis and is rented out to swim teams on a more limited scale throughout the year.

The City's aquatics programs have become recognized pace setters in the swim community over the past 40 years by hosting Olympic-caliber programs and participants, serving as a regional destination for swim activities, and providing the entire range of services from learn-to-swim through masters programs. The aquatics programs offered directly by the City (such as swim lessons or open recreation swim) as well as those run by the City's partners (such as the Walnut Creek Aquabears and Aquanuts) continue to attract an estimated 500,000 swimmers annually.

The age, and therefore the condition, of the facilities present a significant challenge to the immediate future of the City's aquatic programs. A swimming facility is a 24-hour a day mechanical operation that requires constant oversight and maintenance to ensure that the appropriate heating, pump, filtration, and chemical systems are all working at the highest level. Given the age of the facilities, they require a substantial amount of work to maintain the infrastructure at acceptable health and safety levels. The bathhouses are also deteriorating, and as a result, the public's ability to enjoy their aquatic experience is severely diminished. Staff has been able to achieve the appropriate health and safety levels, but at significant cost of time and resources. The fact is that the systems are sub-standard. The ability to hold off more serious deterioration in the systems is in question, and the issue appears to be a matter of when, not if, the aquatic facilities will be unable to meet their mechanical, health, safety, and service obligations.

In addition to the limitations imposed by the support systems, the depth of the 50-meter pool is itself a hindrance. The governing body of competitive aquatics, USA Swimming, has determined that pools such as Clarke, with a range of depth from 3.5–5 feet, are of insufficient depth for racing starts from platforms. The City's 50-meter pool does not meet this standard, which restricts the City's ability to host swim meets and to train swimmers.

The aquatics world has also experienced a change in demand for swim activities over the last 40 years. Where the traditional "flat water" pools were once sufficient to satisfy the public's recreational needs, the general public today seeks a more entertaining and rewarding family experience. Examples of this type of aquatic amenity include water slides, beach entry pools, spraygrounds, and aquatic-themed birthday party rooms. The City's facilities lack what could be called "modern" recreational features that could serve the needs of the non-competitive swimmer.

In sum, the generally accepted view of staff and the public is that the pools draw significant participation in spite of the condition of the facilities. The age, the status of the facilities, and the changing demand for aquatics created the opportunity to pursue an assessment of the City's aquatics programs and facilities, the demographic and market trends surrounding aquatics, the corresponding future needs for aquatic services, and the program and facility options to meet these needs.

As part of the 2008-10 budget, the City Council funded this Walnut Creek Aquatic Needs Assessment with parkland dedication funds that can only be used for recreation or park purposes such as this study. In the spring of 2009, the Arts, Recreation and Community Services Department issued a Request For Proposals and selected The Sports Management Group, a strategic planning firm specializing in recreational programs and facilities, to conduct the assessment. The Sports Management Group's team of partners was highlighted by the architectural firm of ELS Architects and the renowned aquatic consultants, Aquatic Design Group.

The City established a steering committee to help guide this project to its completion. Committee members were:

- Rich Carlston, PROS Commissioner
- Barry Gordon, Arts, Recreation and Community Services Director
- Peter Guadagni, Walnut Creek Aquatics Fund
- Karen Heaston-Martin, Aquatics Coordinator
- Chris Rhoades, Aquatics Coordinator
- Kevin Safine, Arts, Recreation and Community Services Assistant Director
- Bob Simmons, Walnut Creek City Council
- Steve Waymire, City Engineer

Needs Assessment Study

The goals of the assessment were to study the current condition of the City's aquatics programs and facilities, engage the public throughout the assessment, identify local and regional trends and demands, and present program and facility options on how the City can continue to meet those demands for at least the next 20 years. To accomplish these goals, The Sports Management Group completed the following tasks:

- Conducted an analysis of the condition of swimming pools, pool decks, building structures, and mechanical systems.
- Gathered input from a variety of community stakeholders
- Assessed the current services provided at the City's aquatic facilities
- Projected demand for Walnut Creek's aquatic programs and services for the next 20 years
- Explored future aquatic program needs and the potential to serve new market segments
- Recommended steps to meet future demand, including new programming and facility improvements
- Provided a cost estimate of recommended capital improvements and an analysis of how proposed programmatic and facility changes could affect the facility's potential cost recovery.

The consultant team gathered data from a variety of sources, each of which contributed to the findings and recommendations. Included among the sources were engineering and architectural analyses of the facilities, demographic and market resources, interviews and meetings with community stakeholders, City budget data, current City programming and usage, and industry trends.

Based on the information gathered and from the objectives established at the start of the project, The Sports Management Group formulated a set of guiding principles that helped frame their study and ultimately, their recommendations:

- Support the existing aquatics programs and allow for growth in the amount and range of programs
- Better serve the demand for family recreation, learn to swim classes, and instructional programs
- Increase programming flexibility to maximize use and maintain the ability to serve changing needs
- Provide financially sustainable programs and facilities, with reduced operating subsidy.

Findings and Recommendations

The question today is, given the condition of the aquatic facilities, and assuming the Walnut Creek community desires City-provided aquatic programs now and in the future, what is the best opportunity for success? Based on an analysis of the information gathered in 2009, the consultant team made a number of conclusions about the City's aquatic facilities and programs:

- The aquatics facilities are in sub-standard condition, cannot be renovated to meet current standards, and should not be expected to improve without significant investment
- Strong demand for the full range of aquatic programs currently offered at both facilities is expected to continue
- The facilities are unable to meet demand for additional aquatics programs, including:
 - Family aquatics
 - Swim lessons
 - Competitive swim programs
 - Swim meets
 - Social/recreational space
- The City's subsidy of the aquatics will rise if current conditions and trends continue

To meet these challenges and to take advantage of potential opportunities, the consultant recommends a series of changes intended to enhance the future success of Walnut Creek aquatics, which will be described in the next section.

The Baseline

Because the current facilities are exceeding their useful lives, and because there are a number of conditions that do not meet current health and competition standards, a number of facility changes are required simply to replicate the programs and services offered today. Assuming the City wishes to continue offering the same basic levels of service in the future without any expanded offerings, the consultant team identified these upgrades:

- Replace the 50-meter pool with an all deep pool of the same length and width.
- Replace and enlarge the 25-meter x 15-yard dive pool with a 30-meter-25-yard deep pool.
- Replace the instructional pool and add 200 additional square feet to offset the loss of shallow water in the existing 50-meter pool.
- Remodel and expand the bathhouse to accommodate health and mechanical requirements and to provide current public amenities.
- No changes are recommended to the Larkey facility.
- Total estimated project cost in 2010 dollars: \$16.4 million
- Estimated annual City subsidy: \$700,000 - \$750,000.

While the consultant is of the opinion that these improvements would meet the current aquatic service levels, unmet demand would not be provided for, and the City's subsidy would essentially remain the same as it is today. Thus, the baseline is not the consultant's recommended approach.

The Recommended Option

The consultant recommends a series of improvements intended to provide for current and unmet services, comply with all applicable codes, and reduce the operating subsidy. These recommendations build upon the baseline approach discussed above and include additional opportunities.

- Replace all three existing pools at Clarke with four new pools:
 - A 50-meter by 25-yard all-deep pool
 - A 35-meter by 25-yard pool with movable bulkhead
 - A 6-lane instructional pool
 - A new family recreational pool
- Modernize and expand the bathhouse and supporting mechanical systems
- Renovate the existing pool at Larkey, replace the baby pool, add a new sprayground, and operate the Larkey facility on a seasonal basis

The total estimated project cost (in 2010 dollars) is \$21.0 million, and the operating subsidy is estimated to be reduced by between \$350,000 and \$450,000 from the current levels of City support.

The Recommended Option meets the goals of this project by adding a tremendous amount of water, providing pools at the sizes, depths, layout, and temperatures that can be expected to serve the current and unmet demand into the future, and reducing the net annual cost to run the pools. While it is understood that these recommendations are significant and will require a considerable commitment of resources, the consultant was asked to focus primarily on the aquatics programs the City should provide in the future and the facilities that should be in place to support these programs.

Specific considerations of the exact costs, the funding plan, the design of the facilities, and the placement of the pools were not included in this report. If the recommendations are accepted by the PROS Commission and the City Council, those issues will be addressed in future phases. These future steps are outlined in general terms at the conclusion of the attached report.

Next Steps

At tonight's meeting, PROS Commissioners are being asked to review the consultant's report and recommendations, to ask questions necessary to gain a fuller understanding of the relevant issues, to receive input from the public, and to provide comments. Staff and The Sports Management Group will bring the report back at the regular April 5, 2010 PROS Commission meeting, perhaps with clarifications or modifications based on the information gathered tonight. Staff will seek a formal recommendation from the Commission at that time.

DOCUMENT ATTACHED:

Walnut Creek Aquatics Needs Assessment Report.

COMMISSION ACTION REQUESTED:

Review the findings and provide comment on the Walnut Creek Aquatics Needs Assessment Report's recommendations.

PREPARED BY: KEVIN SAFINE, 925-256-3589, safine@walnut-creek.org