

CREATE A WINNING COMBINATION

BY LAUREN OZBURN

Programming, planning, and projects are key ingredients in attracting user groups to swimming pools



In the summer before I began middle school, I officially became an elder at the local pool that was within walking distance from my house. I probably consumed a dozen or more frozen Snickers as bribes by lifeguards who wanted to leave the pool on days too cold to remain open. My friends and I treated the pool like our home, and at least one of us would leave a towel to claim a seat for the next day. Teenage-lifeguard me would have been annoyed by pre-teen me.

Reflecting on my childhood, those days at the pool were the most enriching, carefree, and safe environment for me and my friends. Today, more than 25 years later, communities continue to offer spaces that foster childhood memories by strategically planning programs and amenities. It is never too early—or too late—to plan to maximize utilization of a facility.

BEFORE

In 2016, a feasibility study helped determine that a major renovation was needed at the Kirksville Aquatic Center in Kirksville, Mo.



Community input showed that residents supported an outdoor pool designed more for recreational family fun with modern amenities and an indoor pool that served programming needs.

AFTER



PLANNING FOR OFFERINGS

To get people through the door to a swimming pool, there must be a multi-functional space that meets their needs.

Ideally, a facility will have a mix of spaces and features that allow for progression of use as skills develop. The goal is to flip the use of space in a day and to have those spaces available as a user's interest and needs change.

Determine the right features and programming by assessing who will use the pool and how it will be used, and then develop a plan that includes the appropriate depths, size of space, and amenities. After developing an initial plan, check for redundancies, for any opportunities to scale back, and for potential challenges. For example, if a successful program can be offered in six lap lanes vs. eight, save the space

and costs associated with the extra two lanes and divert the resources to other needed spaces.

TIPS:

- Identify the demographics to be served and how various groups will use a facility
- Inventory anticipated programs and their specific operating requirements (e.g., depths, preferred schedules, special requirements, features, equipment needed, etc.)
- Create a written narrative that compares user needs to space and budget parameters
- Consider the support spaces needed to offer a quality program
- Prepare the community for a lapse in program offerings while improvements are made.



OPERATIONAL BUSINESS PLANNING

Opening a pool is not enough; it needs to serve a purpose for the diverse groups that use it. Developing an operational business plan is recommended in order to identify the challenges and opportunities that will occur naturally at a facility. A plan also provides an opportunity to compare a facility with others and adjust offerings to fit the needs of the community.

A usable business plan identifies the general operating conditions of a facility, including milestone dates (e.g., opening and closing dates, events, or scheduled maintenance), hours of operation, and the type and level of resources. A schedule of operation maps out opportunities for programming and utilization so the operators and the public know what to expect.

A plan not only provides strategic guidance but also is a functional tool in creating annual operating budgets and assessing facility feasibility.

Ensuring that an aquatic facility is efficient and financially sustainable, while being a cornerstone of parks and recreation services, has become an increasing standard. Actively maintaining this plan will assist in evaluating cost-recovery levels and in making targeted adjustments that meet agency goals.

TIPS:

- Develop an inventory of the spaces and corresponding characteristics (e.g., square footage, length, depths, features in the space, etc.)
- Log the activities that are occurring per space, by hour, and by day (note: schedules may vary by day)

- Assess which activities are meeting operational goals and the groups that are (and are not) being served by those activities
- Identify the gaps; focus on finding solutions to maximize participation and usership
- Study the staffing resources needed and develop a plan to recruit and retain staff members
- Develop a comprehensive marketing and communication plan.

Sample Pool Space Inventory

POOL AREAS AND PROGRAM OFFERINGS						
	COMPETITION POOL	DIVING WELL	LAZY RIVER	PLUNGE POOL	SPLASH PAD	ZERO-DEPTH POOL
Aqua Fitness Classes	*	*	*	*		
Lap Swimming	*	*				
Open Swim	*	*	*	*		*
Rentals	*	*	*	*		*
Swim Lessons	*	*		*		*
Swim Team Practice and Meets	*	*				
Tot-Time					*	*
Water Walking			*			

KEEPING THE INTEREST ALIVE

People like predictability, but they also like new amenities to maintain and recapture interest. There is often competition for recreational dollars, and because of this, agencies should plan for ongoing improvements to remain relevant. Improvements can be moderate, or they can be multi-million-dollar projects to be phased in or be in one big reveal. No matter the decision, assessing and refreshing a facility periodically is recommended.



AFTER

The renovation of the indoor pool included reconfiguring the existing pool basin to include shallow water and a current channel.

Sample Pool Schedule Inventory

MONDAY - THURSDAY							
	7:30-9 a.m.	9-9:30 a.m.	9:30-10 a.m.	10-11:30 a.m.	11:30-12 p.m.	12-6 p.m.	6-8 p.m.
Lap Pool	Swim Team		Lap Swimming Swim Lessons (9:15 a.m. start)		Closed	Open Swim	Open Lessons (5:50 p.m. start) Fitness
Lazy River	Closed		Water Walking		Closed	Open Swim	
Plunge Pool	Aqua Fitness (optional)	Aqua Fitness		Swim Lessons (10 a.m. start)	Closed	Open Swim	
Splash Pad	Closed			Tot-Time		Open Swim	
Zero-Depth	Closed			Tot-Time		Open Swim	

FRIDAY							
	7:30-9 a.m.	9-9:30 a.m.	9:30-10 a.m.	10-11:30 a.m.	11:30-12 p.m.	12-8 p.m.	After 8 p.m.
Lap Pool	Swim Team		Lap Swimming		Closed	Open Swim	Special Programming
Lazy River	Closed		Water Walking		Closed	Open Swim	
Plunge Pool	Closed					Open Swim	
Splash Pad	Closed			Tot-Time		Open Swim	
Zero-Depth	Closed			Tot-Time		Open Swim	

SATURDAY AND SUNDAY			
	7:30-12 p.m.	12-8 p.m.	After 8 p.m.
Lap Pool	Closed	Open Swim	Rental Options
Lazy River		Open Swim	
Plunge Pool		Open Swim	
Splash Pad		Open Swim	
Zero-Depth		Open Swim	



Improvements that are easy to maintain, cost-effective, and noticeable to guests (like the addition of a climbing wall) vs. something hidden in a bathhouse are a good place to start. It may mean adding more shade, resurfacing the zero-depth or diving boards, or adding a basketball goal. Refreshing paint and landscaping, adding more deck chairs, or repainting restrooms are examples of moderate

improvements that can increase user satisfaction and provide a new experience.

If adding revenue-generating opportunities to bring in new groups is a priority, rental areas or updated concession equipment may be added to expand the menu. Special events, promotions, or niche programs can be used to showcase a facility for people who may not otherwise visit.

Over time, residents may feel like a swimming pool works for them, but wish there was a big, unique feature. As newer and more modern facilities in the area are built, it can be expected that the community will want to update its facility. To address that concern, a distinguished amenity can be planned during the capital-development process. This might be a waterslide replacement or addition, an adjacent splash-pad or play structure, or a universal restroom (or two).

TIPS:

- Solicit and evaluate feedback and usage annually
- Look at options for change, assess the feasibility of the options, and submit budget requests proactively
- Create a multi-year maintenance and replacement plan, based on immediate, moderate, and long-term needs
- Think about making modifications, large or small, every 5 to 10 years to maintain interest.

From my pre-teen vantage point, I saw workers going in and out of the pool before it opened, and I was concerned about what they were doing to my sanctuary. When I arrived on the first day of the season, to my surprise, one of the one-meter diving boards was swapped out with a drop slide, a shade structure was erected next to the concession stand, and the pool was even better than in the previous summer. Right before my eyes, the facility had transformed into a summer destination for my entire neighborhood. My friends and I made new childhood memories with the thrill of the

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AFTER

The renovation of the outdoor pool included the addition of a splash pad, water slides, current channel, and active play features.

slide, and more families socialized under the shade canopy during the lunch hour. Our experiences were enhanced, and more people flocked to the pool because the city had studied how the facility could better serve us well before I showed up with my daily allotment of bagged sandwiches and sunscreen. **PRB**

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