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Popping the Questions

When entering into a relationship with the community, it's all about learning what everyone wants. The only way to find out is to ask, ask and ... ask.

By John F. Whitmore, CPRP
Special to Aquatics International

These days, it seems as if every time you turn around there's a new aquatics center opening.

What's behind this growth? Is it specious lines of reasoning, such as "everyone else has one," "a re-election is coming up," or perhaps the "we must create a monument to ourselves" strategy? In reality, there's a little bit of these attitudes in every project.

How can you determine if a new facility is right for your community? The answer is through a carefully planned and executed community needs assessment, research of aquatics facility trends, community education and a comprehensive feasibility study.

Building an aquatics facility is a monumental task; it could take five years or more for the entire process to unfold. The majority of the effort often takes place well before groundbreaking in the form of needs assessment. Leaders must determine who the center is for, how and where it will be built — and whether it should be built at all.

Indeed, much of the effort centers on whether to build, rather than where and how to build. The only way to find out is by asking.

Community needs assessment

How does city leadership determine if a new facility is needed? It really has to learn how current facilities, public and private, are being used. How well are the facilities attended?



MORE INFORMATION

■ **Private solutions**

Involving the private sector may be part of a worthwhile plan to get your aquatics facility built.

■ **Checklists for success**

The idea of building an aquatics facility from scratch can be daunting. Use these checklists to make the task more manageable:

- [Planning community meetings](#)
- [Selecting the right site and facility design team](#)
- [Construction schedule](#)

READER RESPONSE

■ **What Do You Think?**

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How often do programmed classes fill and close? Is anyone ever turned away from public swim times because bather load limits are reached? Which programs cannot be offered because of overcrowding or other lack of pool space? What part of the city do people come from? If they are just coming from the neighborhoods around the pool, then maybe many citizens don't come because of transportation problems.

The availability of alternative facilities also must be explored. Are there other pools nearby? Do these pools allow the general public to use them? Some might be in health clubs, high schools, universities, country clubs, homeowners' associations or other organizations that restrict use to their own groups. How are these organizations meeting the public need?

In some cases, it may be best to contract with a private agency to provide public programs. It could be the most cost-effective way if there are a number of privately operated pools that have unused space and hours. In this way, some cities have totally leased out private facilities to provide traditional public services. But it has proven quite painful to other cities when services were poor or prices for the services made the programming affordable only to higher-income households.

Community demographics are important to assessing need. The most significant demographic is community growth. Many communities built their first pool after a period of sustained growth. That facility became a source of civic pride and met the hometown demand. One traditional public pool may meet the needs of a community of 20,000 to 25,000 residents. However, when the city experiences another growth spurt, that facility may be overwhelmed with demand.

The socioeconomic mix of the community is key. Mapping the average incomes, average ages and population concentrations can show where some population segments are underserved. Areas where there's new community growth usually means family growth. Developers often create recreational facilities in new housing tracts to draw in new home buyers when cities do not have adequate facilities.

In communities that have under-built or "never built" aquatics facilities, where are people going? Most of the time, they're helping a neighboring city to support its pool by attending, and usually paying higher, nonresident charges. Checking the neighboring city that has more or updated facilities for its percentage of nonresident users can be eye-opening. Nonresident usage can be more than 40 percent of its total attendance.

What does that mean for the local government, which is underserving the citizenry's aquatics demands? It means there's some loss of civic pride and livability in the town. More importantly, people are spending their leisure dollars elsewhere. Aquatics facilities attract people, and that attracts

businesses. The people support the businesses, the taxes support the facility and community needs are met.

Trends research

Once your community needs assessment has identified unmet needs, it's time to examine those needs in relation to the types of facilities that can serve them. The three facility design trends that will need to be researched are traditional and untraditional facilities, and a hybrid facility, which has elements of each.

A traditional facility is the "old" community pool comprised of a large, concrete-lined hole with water in it. It's great for swim lessons, swim teams and, with a lot of imagination, it's fun, too.

The problem is that this is the video-game generation. That's where untraditional facilities come in. These centers add lots of entertainment. They include stand-alone or combinations of splash (or spray) grounds, interactive play equipment in very shallow water, slides, wave pools and continuous rivers. These are currently the most popular style in private-sector facilities because they serve large numbers of people, can require a smaller safety staff, command higher user fees and have the best chance of turning a profit.

Larger untraditional facilities with waterpark features may charge admission fees in excess of \$20 along with concession, locker and novelty sales opportunities. These kinds of parks will turn a handsome profit despite higher costs for maintenance, operation and taxes. Successful parks typically turn back a percentage of their profits into a sinking (or reserve) fund to expand or upgrade to keep their image fresh and exciting.

It's rare for public agencies to build the larger parks; they typically opt for smaller waterparks with just a few entertainment features. These community parks can be built close to target neighborhoods to allow for walk-in patronage and have bather loads of up to 1,500 at a time.

Hybrid facilities might have a traditional competitive pool along with several waterpark features — for good reason. While it's tough to turn a profit with a traditional pool (let alone break even), one with waterpark features attracts enough public attention to make up any losses. And it generates a little profit, too.

The waterpark features usually are added as a renovation to an older, traditional pool when enough space is available. Indoor-outdoor facilities are an excellent example of making this concept work. Officials in Denton, Texas, have authorized construction of just such a facility. A joint project between the city and the Denton Independent School District, construction is funded through bonds. The revenue is expected to cover operating costs.

Result: a facility that does not require taxes to operate and was approved by taxpayers through a bond measure.

It's important to use the demographic data from the needs assessment to determine the kinds of features that will meet public entertainment needs. For example, slides are always a favorite with teens — the greater the thrill, the better most teens will like it. Younger children prefer interactive play. Add a few valves, levers, geysers, and dumping buckets and the little ones will be amused for hours on end.

One of the best ways to research features is to visit a number of newer facilities of each type. Watch how people interact with each feature, note their ages and which features are more popular, and observe how long the water component holds their attention.

One last item to research is how “theming” a facility can add entertainment value. The addition of murals on indoor walls, faux rock, patterned concrete and even sculptures can change simple playgrounds into adventures.

Community education

This can be the easiest or the hardest part of the process. If there are trendy facilities in neighboring cities, chances are, many people know about them and have visited them. Nearby communities may even have a large commercial waterpark that has already spent many thousands of dollars to educate the public on how fun water can be. In this case, the public also knows how expensive those parks can be and may want to have a closer, less-expensive alternative.



It isn't glamorous part of pool building, but gaining the public's support is imperative. That's where community meetings come in.

The most difficult community education process occurs when people just have not seen anything other than their own traditional pool. “That pool was good enough for me as a child, and it is good enough for my kids” will become a constant comment.

To counter that attitude, you must first show the public that the current facilities are not meeting demand. A separate community meeting to report the needs assessment findings is vital to set the stage for introducing a “new kind of pool.”

The real goal is to create buy-in for a new pool. Once that need is recognized, an introduction to the kinds of features can be made in another community meeting. Issues such as

fun, family togetherness, youth involvement, safety, affordability and self-sufficiency are some important benefits to stress.

The best way to start is in face-to-face presentations and discussions with the public. Special interest groups, such as swim team booster clubs, can help rally whole neighborhoods. The secret to involving groups is to answer the "What's in it for me?" question. General community meetings can be followed up with radio interviews, cable TV access channel reports, and PTA and school presentations.

Once a certain level of community expectation has been created, the public agency must satisfy it with a new facility. A "blue ribbon" committee of citizens and staff representatives should be formed to match the now-documented need with appropriate waterfeatures to create a preliminary facility design. This basic design then can be used as a template for a feasibility study.

Feasibility study

The goal of the feasibility study is to see if enough business can be generated by the documented need to support the facility.

A complete turnkey facility would have operating expenses and bond payments fully covered by operating revenue. This private sector approach is gaining more acceptance in public sector agencies.

A second option, and by far the most common, is that the public funds the facility construction through bonds, and the facility revenue supports the operating budget.

Feasibility studies can be done in-house if there's enough expertise in the organization. However, many agencies prefer an independent opinion and often contract with recreation consultants. Either way, information is collected from public sources, surveys of similar facilities, pay schedules and market prices for services. Then it is compiled into what is really a "best guess" of expected revenues and expenses.

Economic feasibility is just one part of overall facility feasibility. More questions need to be answered to establish if other community resources will support the facility: How deep is the labor pool? There's already a lifeguard shortage in many communities. Which of our competitors are now meeting the excess public demand, and how much of that business will they retain if the city does build? Other recreational opportunities also compete, such as large "dry" amusement parks, movie theaters and "mall crawling" (essentially, teens hanging out at the mall).

The funding of a new facility is usually much easier when the needs assessment, facility feature research, community education, and feasibility study are done conscientiously. To

determine if you've been conscientious enough, see if you can answer "yes" to these questions:

Can I document the need for a new facility or renovation of an existing one? Did I get enough community input? Has the project's feasibility been established?

Congratulations. Public agencies that follow this process often see bond approvals reaching up to 80 percent.

John F. Whitmore has been in aquatics for 30 years, working with public and private agencies managing multiple aquatic and recreation facilities. He has written articles on aquatics management and was awarded the National Park & Recreation Association's Exceptional Aquatic Service Award in 1998. Currently superintendent of leisure services for the city of Denton, Texas, he serves as chief instructor-trainer for NRPA's Aquatic Facility Operator course. He can be reached at john.whitmore@cityofdenton.com.

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