

The Dolphin Swim Club

Preface

The Dolphin Swim Club aquatic facility was built around 1956. It consists of three pools, serviced by well water. (This is significant due to the considerable savings realized over using a municipal water source.) All three pools are heated, utilize cartridge filter systems and are in surprisingly excellent condition, considering their age. The support buildings are also in very good condition, considering their age, but have issues with accessibility. The pool manager provided information that the circulation systems are all piped through PVC plastic pipe, which has greatly benefited the longevity of the filtration system, since galvanized steel piping was the typical material utilized in pool construction in the mid fifties.

It is evident that this facility has been well cared for. It has a number of dated infrastructure items, but is in as good or better overall condition than a number of pools that are operating in this area of the state. The cartridge filtration system is labor intensive and inefficient in its ability to adequately meet the demand of a commercial pool operation in larger swimming pools. Public swimming pools today typically utilize high rate sand filters or diatomaceous earth filters to meet the sanitation demands of high use periods, public pools typically experience.

The age of the pools are also evident with the use of the skimmer return lines for surface water. Although prevalent in early pool construction, continuous gutter systems provide a much more effective means of returning surface water to the filtration area. Since more of the dirt, debris, body oils and other contaminants are contained in the top six inches of pool water, gutter systems allow a much more effective means of maintaining the sanitation of a pool. Skimmers however, are still permitted by the Pa. Bathing code and their use at the Dolphin Swim club is in compliance with current regulations. It is simply a dated, less effective means of maintaining pool water.

The bath house facilities space seem to be tight and the most likely areas of non-compliance regarding accessibility. Although it was not feasible to take exact measurements regarding wheel chair access, handles, dispensers, etc. This is an area that it seems would be addressed by any licensed architect if a study were to be needed.

Pool Operation

The pools are being capably operated by the current management group. Mr. Parrish appeared to have a wealth of information regarding pool management and operations and seems to be doing a good job. The pool area was clean, as well as the support facilities. Having arrived early in the morning, prior to the arrival of the daily maintenance staff, the pools were all found to be crystal clear. No dirt was observed on the pool bottoms and the decks were clean and ready for the arrival of pool patrons. This is a critical aspect of a good pool operation, since customers expect to see clear, inviting water when they

arrive to utilize a swimming facility. It also goes a long way in maintaining a safe, clean and properly sanitized pool that is in compliance with the current bathing code regulations.

The problem that the township is being confronted with, is the annual deficit that is encountered for the operation of the pool complex. Facing a \$40,000 yearly deficit can be a daunting task for any municipality. However, this is more the norm, rather than the exception, in many seasonal pool operations. It is common for many summer pool operations to be conducted in our area, with expenses exceeding receipts in most cases. The municipalities typically have chosen to prioritize the service being provided to its citizens rather than being able to establish a self sustaining operation.

Swimming has undergone a dramatic change in the past decade. It is common for private citizens to purchase pools and have them installed in their back yards. In addition, swimming is no longer the number one recreational pursuit. The number of individuals who swim for recreation has greatly diminished. The public is more inclined to seek aquatic facilities where they can do other types of activities, rather than the traditional swimming they pursued in the past. These include, but are not limited to: water slides, water play apparatus and equipment, interactive water activities and zero depth or minimal standing water areas with soft surfaces for multiple play opportunities. This is easily illustrated by the success of local commercial water parks such as Sesame Place and Camel Beach. Many municipal owned aquatic facilities have incorporated play features in their pool renovations in an effort to attract new customers and build their business and subsequently their income base.

This however, is not an inexpensive venture. Construction expenses can easily cost millions of dollars, depending upon the extent of the renovations or expansion of the facilities. This is a decision that should be thoroughly researched and made only with the full support of the community. It is a major investment and typically requires outside financial assistance. However, if it something that is supported by the community and will be utilized by the public, it can greatly expand the community recreation program that is being offered by the township.

Concession Operation

Although the current concession operation is leased out to a private individual as a service to the current pool patrons, it should be noted that a properly supported concession operation can greatly increase a pool operations chances for being self sufficient.

The Pennsylvania Recreation and Parks Society recently requested that I create a "Concession Workshop" that could be provided as part of their educational program. The premise of the workshop is to provide participants with pertinent information on how to establish a successful concession operation that will maximize profits while providing a sound product line for patrons. It is modeled for swimming pool operations. A concession stand operation, particularly at a swimming pool can sometimes generate enough additional income to offset pool operation expenses and decrease the likelihood of encountering that large operational deficit each year.

If the township were to initiate a study for maintaining the pool operation, it would benefit them greatly to consider incorporating questions regarding the operation of a concession stand. As a simple

reference, look at the local commercial aquatic operations. Where are they generating a large percentage of their income? It is almost certainly to be in their food service operations.

Conclusion

Having limited information and a short inspection of the pool facility, it is not my intension to make any specific recommendation to the township as to whether they should keep the Dolphin Swim Club facilities open or to close them. Instead, it would seem prudent to address the question as it would most likely be discussed, if I were sitting in the chair occupied by the Recreation Director.

First, although the facility definitely could use some improvements and increased effectiveness of its physical plant, it is a first rate pool facility that has stood well to the test of time. Pools typically do not hold up as well as this facility seems to have after 52 years of freeze and thaw cycles in the off season.

The question that seems to be the key here is simple. Is there adequate potential patronage in the community to support the operation of this facility? What would it take to generate the additional patronage to increase public use of the pool? Does the township have the means, (or desire), to get information out to its citizens and try to determine if there is interest in utilizing the pool? If so, it would be important to determine what amenities would need to be incorporated or sought by the public to interest them in using the pool. Don't forget programming. It is always a great way to increase receipts by offering income generating activities at the pool, as opposed to physical plant improvements.

If the proper feedback can be determined, it may support the township taking steps to improve the facilities, on a phased schedule, as funding would permit. If not, then the township needs to make a determination.

Is the current investment in the facility sustainable for offering the current service to the community? Does the township want to continue offering this level of support as a part of its community recreation program?

On the other hand, is the financial support provided to the operation of the pool becoming too much of monetary burden to the township to sustain? Will the facility continue to be a drain on the finances of the township that will force them to seek an alternative use of the funds?

It is always a tough decision to make when a local municipality needs to determine what level of service it can provide to its citizens for recreation and parks opportunities. The township has a tremendous asset in the Dolphin Swim Club. It would appear that the facility would bear trying to continue to maintain and operate. It seems that it has reached a point where the township needs to weigh its options and determine what the future might hold for the facility.

If it were my facility, I would pursue every means within my means to determine if it could be kept open. However, that is without my being aware of the current financial situation facing the township and its budgetary means.