

Statement to the Arlington Aquatics Committee

By

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16 March 2021

I am representing the Swimmer listserv, a group of about 80 Arlingtonians active in the aquatics community. Our comments concern the proposed FY 2022 budget and the pending rewrite of the School Board's M-15 policy and Policy Implementation Procedures (PIP) on Aquatic Facilities and Programs.

FY 2022 Proposed Aquatics Budget

Underlying my comments is the expectation that the fee revenue to be generated in FY2022 by APS will recover 60 percent of the costs attributed to community swim. This represents more than 100 percent of the revenue-recovery expected from fee-payers given County- and School-approved fee discounts offered for age, income, and other reasons. Therefore, we support the decision of the Superintendent not to raise admission fees at this time. [Only third-party rental fees are proposed to be raised to match market conditions.]

As long as it is the policy of both Boards to provide discounted admission fees to residents, there will be a need for tax support. Given that community swim is a County service, we ask that this Committee work with the County Board to ensure an equitable and dependable allocation of tax support for community swim. Specifically:

- Tax Support Should be a Fixed Percent of Operation and Maintenance (O&M) Costs Attributed to the Community: We ask that the annual "Shared Costs Transfer" (SCT) from the Department of Parks & Recreation (DPR) be set at a fixed percent of costs attributed to community use, rather than a fixed-dollar amount. When the SCT was first negotiated in 2009 (for FY 2010), the fixed-amount transfer covered 26 percent of costs. Since this time, the cost of operating the APS pools has increased, especially as our new, larger-capacity, state-of-art facilities have opened and community use, including programs offered by DPR, has expanded. Despite two fixed-dollar increases (in FY 2012 and FY 2020), the SCT has, over the last 12 years, covered only an average of 20.8 percent of costs, including seven years when the percent of costs covered was 19 percent or less. In FY 2021, DPR began to tie the amount of the transfer to the Consumer Price Index (CPI). While we are grateful that DPR has recognized the need for an annual catch-up to the SCT, the CPI is not an accurate indicator of the cost of community swim. The CPI adjustments proposed for FY 2021 and 2022 represent a 4 percent increase over the FY 2020 base transfer, but even with this increase, the SCT will cover only 21 percent of projected community costs in FY 2022. If the transfer amount was a fixed percent of community costs, APS would be in a better position to know the amount of fee revenue it would need to collect to meet its budget.
- Tax Support Should At Least Cover Board-Approved Admission Discounts and Be Fairly Distributed to All Public Pools Used by the Community: The aquatics community is looking

forward with anticipation to the opening of the Long Bridge Park Aquatics & Fitness Center (LBP) in FY 2022. The LBP will provide a fourth much-needed aquatics facility. We understand that one-time start-up costs will accrue to the opening of this facility, and we are grateful to the Boeing Corporation for the generous naming-rights donation made to cover near term operational costs. Regrettably, the Boeing donation will not last forever. As Arlington tax payers, we ask that the County Board provide the same percent of tax support for community swim irrespective of whether County residents choose to swim in at LBP or APS pools. Last year, this Committee recommended that the level of tax support provided all pools should cover at least 25 percent of costs attributed to community use. Prior to the announcement of the Boeing donation and the pandemic, this was the amount of tax support we understood that DPR would be seeking for the LBP. After LBP emerges from its start-up phase, the percent of tax support provided aquatic facilities should be annually adjusted, as necessary, to ensure alignment across all pools.

As noted above, without County tax support sufficient to cover the costs associated with discounted community swim at all pools, the costs of those Board-approved fee discounts are shifted to patrons who pay their full share or to APS to pay out of its student education funds.

School Board M-15 Aquatic Facilities and Programs Policy and Policy Implementation Procedures (PIP) Rewrite

Meanwhile, there is another option to better recover the costs of community swim. Namely, give APS aquatics management control of time/space allocation within APS pools and the flexibility to pursue cost-saving and revenue-enhancing opportunities. This single-entity management approach is commonly used by aquatics and recreation facilities, including the soon to be opened LBP.

APS did operate the pools as a single-entity successfully, from 1973-1992. However, current School Board policy requires APS aquatics management to prioritize DPR programs above APS' own community-based programs. This precludes APS from pursuing revenue-enhancing initiatives that are similar to programs DPR offers in APS pools – programs that APS has the instructional staff expertise to provide. Further, the fixed allocation of space/time to DPR programs reduces APS flexibility to adjust pool space/time allocations to better accommodate demand for community uses, such as “drop-in swim” or other revenue-generating opportunities. If APS aquatics management is being tasked to meet budget, APS hands cannot be tied as to how they can program the pools to recover costs.

Since COVID restrictions have been in place cancelling most group activities including DPR classes, APS has opened and operated the school-pools under single-management. Under APS management the aquatics budget deficit in FY 2020 has been turned around to projections that costs will be recovered in FY 2021.

The revised M-15 Aquatics Facilities & Programs policy and PIP that will be presented to the School Board later this month includes provisions that will enable APS aquatics management to

meet cost-recovery goals and better serve the community by continuing this level of operational control. Specifically, the rewrite changes the priority usage of school pools by setting as the first priority, after APS student usage, all APS community programs. This “APS Program Use” priority includes the types of revenue-based community programs that are the bread and butter of aquatic facilities and should be part of APS’ aquatics portfolio. The policy change proposed by the staff rewrite of M-15 reinforces the Board’s position that it “designates the priority in which individuals or groups will be allowed to use school facilities.”

For these reasons, we urge you to support the proposed M-15 Policy and PIP revisions.

Thank you for your attention to these recommendations and requests.