

A young girl with a ponytail, wearing a pink one-piece swimsuit, is climbing a set of yellow plastic steps at a water park. She is barefoot and looking towards the right. The steps are part of a larger structure with blue and yellow pipes and railings. Water is splashing around the structure. In the background, there are green trees and a clear sky.

By Scott Hunsaker and Kevin Post

# Recipe for Success

Knowing how to get started and how to avoid mistakes can make your municipal facility a hit

Today, more than ever, building a municipal aquatic center for a new or existing facility requires due diligence. The key difference in a public-sector project versus a private-sector one is consensus building through community outreach. If consensus is not created, citizens may withdraw their support if they feel the program is not relevant to their desires or to their sense of affordability.

It is essential that the community be included when showcasing potential new facilities, the proposed program mix, and activity menus as they develop. Whereas private aquatic development is often controlled by a few people with financial performance being the primary driver, the public sector aquatic development must not only be sustainable, but it must stand up to public scrutiny.

### Common Mistakes

Common mistakes include repairing, replacing or renovating existing facilities. Renovation adds programming value but may not be a good value if the renovation has only a limited life span.

Municipalities sometimes replace the old pool with a brand-new pool of the exact same size and configuration “because the old one already costs too much to operate.” Yet the old pool already may have a leaking pool shell, outdated filtration and lack of recreation amenities, which results in high maintenance costs coupled with fewer swimmers.

The obsolete pool not only might be a compromise to the environment and to swimmers (wasting water, improperly filtering water, etc.) but also to the budget. Replacing or repairing the same flat water pool might be less expensive, but it may not interest the public or make money.

Another common mistake is the timing of the project. Some may rush into building the project without first gaining community consensus. Others may wait too long due to indecision. The longer the waiting period, the more it’s going to cost due to delays and changing expectations. Delays in decision-making also may derail a project as council leadership changes and staff turnover takes its toll. This leads to delays in site selection(s) and even more design dilemmas. It’s best to have a committee representing the community make these important decisions, using careful research based on clear and accurate information.

### Getting It Right

For the recreation professional, leading and facilitating a feasibility study is well worth the time and effort. Design decisions made today will likely last 50 years. Consequently, it’s best to build realistic expectations by testing the appetite of the community. Unlike an aquatic developer who looks at the number of homes in a market area, municipal facilities must look at community consensus and public funding, making sure the facility will be sustainable with inclusive programming. Breaking it down, a typical timing schedule includes feasibility, funding, design, construction and operations.

#### STEP 1: Feasibility

The best place to start is to appoint an internal aquatic project team. The team, sometimes referred to as the steering committee, is responsible for decision-making protocol. The committee is usually made up of local political leadership, the park director, other recreational professionals, community residents, aquatic staff, swim coaches, school representatives and other interested parties.



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## So what's it going to cost?

With building prices varying from coast to coast, budgets can be very different across the country. Rough estimates may include spray parks anywhere from \$250,000 to \$1.2 million, depending on the area and how many features are included. Neighborhood Family Aquatic Centers are in the \$3 million to \$5 million range. Community Family Aquatic Centers are anywhere from \$4 million to \$8 million, while Regional Aquatic Center Venues are in the \$7 million to \$12 million realm. As a general rule of thumb, double the cost for bringing aquatics indoors.

A professional consulting team works with the steering committee to prepare the feasibility study. The process, from the start of the study to the decision to go to referendum (or council vote), takes about 120-160 days. The teams work together to develop a clear mission statement using a common vocabulary that keeps everyone on track. The mission may include aquatic training, lessons, therapy and/or recreation benefits as its goal to the city. As obvious as this should be, it can take several tries to exactly state the varied mission to a diverse audience.

Identifying relevant needs through community outreach can include focus groups, stakeholder interviews and sometimes resident surveys. Surveys gauge potential customers' inclinations and how much of the market you could or should be attracting. Surveys also show the community that you care about what they think.

Focus groups, conducted in real time, reveal residents' tastes, even prompting unanticipated paths, which can be a smorgasbord of invaluable knowledge. Community outreach certainly takes time, but community buy-in is crucial—although often the community members just want what they've seen in peer communities.

The municipality might look at peer communities to generate ideas for the structure and an outline for operations. Looking at the methods of other facilities is helpful in early decision making; however, don't depend on the budgets of other facilities to set your own. That's kind of like comparing your next-door neighbor's grocery budget to your own. After all, they might have more children than you, or the children are older and eat more. They may be more adventurous in their eating habits, or more health conscious.

Variables in communities mean a direct budget correlation is impossible. Your community may have a higher population density, fewer children under 18, more seniors, higher income, fewer aquatic competitors, etc. A city's study must look at its own local reality when detailing line-item budgeting, determining fee affordability and tailoring programming analyses for the proposed facility at its specific location.

Again, this requires intense research by evaluating existing area providers, population characteristics, area construction costs, vendor rate variance, utility costs, climate and many other variables.

The study may then develop three options to meet community needs, given the city's budget: Dream, Reality, and Fall Back. Each concept includes project costs and operation analysis.

- The Dream facility has desired features and components from the community and steering committee. Sometimes the Dream facility is built through grants, donations and pledges from generous residents and local businesses, knowing the Dream facility will generate revenue while increasing the community profile.
- The Reality concept pulls back a notch when all the bells and whistles of the Dream facility seem to be an out-of-reach hurdle.
- The Fall Back model may include phasing, where the city adds an exciting feature each year, keeping families excited and memberships high.

## STEP 2: Funding

Once the concepts are confirmed by the city, the study goes on to match need with political and financial realities by defining funding options. Funding might include a school district, YMCA or a hospital partnership. It might be the sale of bonds, operating leases, and many other creative means such as private contributions.

After funding possibilities are researched, the steering committee must decide how to implement strategy. It can take two to three years to move from the decision to the actual referendum, while other times it may take a simple vote from city council. If the project is going to a public referendum, three keys for success are community participation, doing your homework and getting out the vote.

**STEP 3: Design and Construction**

Once the referendum is approved by the voters, it's time to hire a professional design team with project experience. The design process includes schematic design, design development, construction documents, bid and construction. This can take anywhere from six to 12 months where the climate is temperate and nine to 15 months where the weather is seasonal. An indoor aquatic center may take one to two years to be built.

**STEP 4: Operations**

Operations include three operating models: subsidy, breakeven and positive cash flow. Subsidy uses tax dollars to pay operating expenses, while the breakeven model is able to pay its own operating expenses. Positive cash flow is the facility that is able to pay its own operating expenses and build revenue. While older facilities are typically subsidized due to the higher costs of maintenance and fewer swimmers, a sustainable model is the norm for new facilities, with fiscal operations driven by programming revenue.

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Developing the unique recipe of success for each community is the key to a great project. As the public perceives the facility, so too will it be used this way. Facility expectations are judged from the moment the public enters the gate. Professional presentation in the friendly, fun, clean, but controlled, atmosphere must constantly be examined and carried out by management. **SAS**



Scot Hunsaker has 25 years experience in the aquatic field and leads a team of 30 individuals specializing in aquatic design and operations. The firm has completed more than 700 projects throughout the United States.

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