

Rocky Mountain Reply

*Colorado Springs has three sparkling, new recreation facilities
— after the citizens told the politicians what they wanted.*

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By D. Scot Hunsaker



In 1997, the mayor and city council of Colorado Springs, concerned about voter apathy in their growing city, committed themselves to increasing community awareness and input on the issues. Every citizen who wanted to be heard would be heard. And the more they spoke, the more one area of concern kept popping up: the city's lack of family aquatic recreation centers. No new city pools had been built since the 1940s.

Now — after research and analysis, committees and subcommittees, and, ultimately, approval by reinvigorated voters — Colorado Springs has opened three aquatics centers.

The new Cottonwood Creek Aquatic Center and the renovated American Fitness Center, both indoor facilities, and the new outdoor Wilson Ranch Community Pool are all thriving. But then, that's not surprising given the recreational mission statement set forth for this trio of facilities: "The Colorado Springs community aquatic facilities will be family-oriented facilities dedicated to promoting recreation, physical health and fitness in a safe, attractive environment."

The response to Wilson Ranch, the first of the pools to open last year, was "phenomenal," says Deborah Barry, aquatics supervisor for the city of Colorado Springs. "We reached capacity in the first week. People came from all over the area: Castle Rock, Pueblo, Monument and other towns."

The response was similar at the two indoor facilities, both of which opened in September 2001. Barring any unforeseen events, all three centers should recoup operating costs. "The amazing thing is how much money has been made from birthday parties and other facility rentals," Barry says. "At Cottonwood and Wilson Ranch, 100 percent of the available rental dates have been filled."

"We're also seeing a serious increase in money from public swimming," she says. "In the past, the majority of our funds came from swim lessons. However, this is no longer the case at any of the new facilities."

All this is a sure sign that Colorado Springs has achieved its mission for family recreation — thanks, in large part, to the involvement of its citizens.

The political process

Colorado Springs has experienced a boom over the past decade. Since 1990, the population of this mountain town has grown approximately 20 percent to more than 366,000 nowadays. However, for whatever reason, voter apathy and low voter turnout also increased, becoming an area of concern for Mayor Mary Lou Makepeace and the other eight city council members.

After five months of research and study, the city staff developed the Springs Community Improvements Program (SCIP). This program gives citizens the chance to offer input. Eight Citizen Coordination Committees (CCC) were formed to address specific community areas of interest. Committee members were chosen from a pool of citizens not employed by the city. One CCC was put in charge of overseeing the SCIP subcommittee on parks and public facilities.

Concerns were identified, and recommendations were made and passed along to the city council, which determined what would be put on the ballot for voters' consideration. In 1999, every proposal presented by the CCCs was approved. Clearly, this process worked. Citizens became more involved with their community, more interested in issues and less apathetic about the importance of voting.

Colorado Springs voted to acquire the necessary funds for this operation through the sale of bonds. This method has worked well for them. After three years of paying off its bonds, Colorado Springs was declared by the U.S. Treasury to have a stronger local economy than that of the average U.S. city. Therefore, Colorado Springs received a higher bond rating, resulting in lower interest rates on the bonds, yielding a shorter bond term. The bonds will be paid off no later than 2015 rather than 2019, as originally planned.

When SCIP concluded that Colorado Springs needed new family recreation centers, they consulted Terry Putman, the city's director of parks and recreation. Putman started a base-line education process to show SCIP members exactly what a recreation center could be.

After much deliberation, Putman borrowed a bus from the Department of Transportation and drove most of the committee members to Denver, where everyone received a tour of a genuine indoor leisure pool, complete with aquatic and dry amenities. For many SCIP members, it was their first glimpse of a modern family recreation center. They were impressed.

Colorado Springs citizens now knew what they were working to develop. Having seen a new family rec center, they knew what kind of facility they wanted, but they still wanted all the facts.

So the city commissioned a feasibility study outlining all the major issues facing a development of this kind. The study covered a lot of ground, such as different kinds of

aquatics centers across the nation, their propensity to turn a profit and the groups that typically enjoy such facilities. Also included was the input of city residents, parks and recreation staff members, and concerned citizen groups. And there was an analysis of area aquatic providers; an evaluation of potential user groups and a local demographic analysis (that is, population by distance from the proposed sites, and age and income of population); facility management issues; probable revenues and expenses; and overall operation opinions.

Initially, many user groups stressed the importance of creating a competition venue for local swim teams. Through the study process, it was determined that the cost-effectiveness of competition venues would be well beneath the cost-effectiveness of leisure venues in that area.

Beauty in the background

Bottom line? The people of Colorado Springs wanted to build three aquatics centers, but they didn't want them to stand out as bland structures in an otherwise lush and natural environment. They wanted to offer patrons a chance to harmonize with the environment while enjoying their community aquatics centers. So all three handsome structures also boast breathtaking views of Pikes Peak.

But, not all is perfect. Deck space is very limited at these facilities. While that is not a major issue for Wilson Ranch's outdoor pool, which can be expanded, there is no cost-effective way to expand the deck of an indoor pool without sacrificing pool area. If money were no object, says city aquatics supervisor Barry, she would remove at least one lap lane from the Wilson Ranch facility because "at least one lane is always open."

At the renovated American Fitness Center, Barry considers the office space to be too large, and would love to convert some of it into an employee room.

In Barry's opinion, Cottonwood Creek could benefit from adding a spa for adults and a spray park for younger children. Barry would love to see her concrete floors replaced with tile, but that's mainly an aesthetic issue, so it rates low on her list of possible alterations.

The biggest issue, says Barry, is deck space. As far as she's concerned, these facilities need more spectator areas and deck lounging spots. As it is, she currently doubles the community rooms as viewing centers for spectators.

But all in all, the three aquatics centers have become more popular than anyone anticipated — and with the revenue figures to support that. "We are very excited to have these pools, to be able to offer these great services and facilities to the people of Colorado Springs," Putman says. "I only hope that we can get more of them."



Cottonwood Creek Aquatic Center

Cottonwood Creek Aquatic Center's wave pool has something for everyone.

Because this is an area where young families and teenagers tend to reside, a wave pool seemed like the right idea. With the flip of a switch, the waves stop and the space becomes ideal for swim lessons, aquatic exercise classes and water-walking.

But that's not all. To complement the flexible wave pool, a dedicated separate leisure pool was put in, featuring a water slide and catch pool, a water vortex and current channel.

If visitors can take their eyes off Cottonwood Creek's various aquascapes, they'll discover a panoramic view of Pikes Peak, its rivers and canyon.

The indoor wave pool washes up to a zero-beach entry, where any patron leaving the wave pool can stop, look out a window and see Pikes Peak stretching across the horizon. The effect cannot be understated — it's as if a beach washes up to a mountain view. To further enhance this effect, a mural of natural aquatic life was painted at the other end of the wave pool.

Creating an aquatics center with a great view was easier said than done, however. To minimize the possibility of glare, the designers elected to use natural light from the walls and a natural skylight in the ceiling, thus forming a comfortable indoor environment.

Wilson Ranch Community Pool

The Wilson Ranch Community Pool is located in a different area of Colorado Springs from the two indoor facilities. Instead of overlooking Pikes Peak, this pool is nestled at its foothills. From many locations in the water and on the deck, pool patrons can look uphill at the mountaintops.

For designers, a big advantage of an outdoor facility such as this is its expansion possibilities. Unlike a natatorium, it costs little to enlarge the deck and create a more open, social environment.



On the other hand, this outdoor pool is open only during summertime due to the weather. Therefore, its marketing plan targets schoolchildren and their families.

Doubtless that's just as well because this aquatic facility was clearly designed for family recreation. The pool features a water vortex, zero-beach entry, current channel, water slide with a catch pool, and a participatory play feature.

For those who feel like practicing their swimming, or just swimming for fitness while in the fresh air, this facility also has three lap lanes.

Many locals would've been satisfied with this beautiful facility by itself, but designers didn't want to miss the chance to capitalize on the beauty of the surrounding environs. So they added a bathhouse with natural light configurations similar to those found in the indoor aquatics centers.

The Aquatic and Fitness Center

Looking south, the city turned to renovating an existing indoor competition pool and gym. The final result was everything the good citizens of Colorado Springs could've asked for.

The Aquatic and Fitness Center (AFC) now offers an indoor leisure pool with zero-beach entry, a participatory play feature, water slide, water vortex and lap lanes.

Mindful of the area's pervading age demographic, the city also decided to pep up the facility with a spa. From the bubbling spa, relaxing parents can watch their children play in the many leisure time amenities — and enjoy a sweeping view of Pikes Peak, which features a small clear lake at the base of the mountains.

When designing the AFC, designers extended the life of an old facility in an established area while maximizing project costs by building at an existing location. The natural light coming into the building from the walls and the natural skylight, as well as the beautiful view, all seem to confirm that the design and construction of this facility was a great decision.



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