Supersizing Your Existing Swimming Pool

Analyzing Options for an Aging Aquatic Facility

By D. Scot Hunsaker

See if this story sounds familiar: You're operating a community swimming pool that, in its heyday, was the centerpiece of summertime activity. It was the place to be on a hot summer day, when nearly every kid and parent in town would be diving and splashing and socializing by the pool. Now, 30 years later, attendance has nearly dried up, and so will the pool if the leaks and cracks in the pool and pipes can't be patched together for another season. Even if the pool can be salvaged, is it really providing the recreation the community wants? The dwindling attendance figures suggest the answer.

Scenarios similar to this are being played out all across the country. A boom of community swimming pools accompanied America's rush to the suburbs in the 1950s and '60s, and now those pools are facing their golden years. Most of these facilities are showing their age, while a few have resisted the ravages of time. Regardless, nearly all share the same attendance and revenue drainage. What's the best way to turn this tide? The answers vary from case to case. Many communities have successfully modified existing structures and won back significant enthusiasm and attendance. Others have started again from scratch. Deciding which direction is right can be a challenge, but with research, analysis and some effort, you can determine whether renovation or replacement is right for your facility.

Hold On To What You've Got

Just because your aquatic facility isn't a teenager anymore doesn't mean it can't have a little pride in how it looks. Just as you exercise and eat wisely to maintain your health (or at least have good intentions), an ongoing "fitness" program for your swimming pool, deck, bathhouse and mechanical areas will prolong the useful life of the facility. Even small acts of tender loving care—keeping grass and weeds from growing on the deck, caulking seams and repairing cracks, maintaining fresh paint—will not only extend the functional life of the facility, but will also help slow the attendance drain by making the facility as appealing as it can be. Both of these outcomes will help maximize revenue, and when it comes time to represent your case for changes, you'll be able to show you've done everything possible with the existing facility.

Also, it will be immensely useful in the future to have substantive documentation of the current and recent operating history of the facility, so start building a file. Include safety reports, maintenance issues, attendance and revenue. This history will be helpful, again, when it is time to seek the support of civic leaders.

Know Your Customers

Before deciding which direction is right for the future of your community, you should know what the *community* thinks. Find out what your patrons like and what they don't like. While this can be accomplished through mail or phone surveys, a more honest response can often be obtained at the pool by surveying customers in person. People are less likely to simply complain, and instead, will honestly and more constructively reflect on the experience at hand. Appropriate topics for evaluation include staffing, quality of service, cleanliness, water quality, overall appearance, what they like best—and least—about the facility, and what amenities might be added that would make them to attend more often.

Perhaps even more importantly, than knowing who your customers are and what they like, however, is knowing who your customers *aren't* and why they aren't coming to your pool. Often this is a much larger group of potential customers than your remaining active customers. You need to know why people who once came to your pool are no longer attending. Have the demographics changed—has the community aged, lost employers, or experienced a move in population center—or have people simply opted for a different recreational opportunity? You can't make a good business decision about how to improve your facility if you don't know what improvements will bring patrons back.

It isn't as easy to survey people who aren't sitting by the poolside, but it is worth the effort to seek them out. Look through old annual pass records, visit competitive facilities, go to a local mall or other popular gathering place and ask people for their opinions and suggestions.

Another beneficial point of view can come from your peers in neighboring communities. Invite P&R managers to visit your facility and share their candid, fresh viewpoints with you. Often, when you see your pool day in and day out, you become blind to subtle changes that have gradually occurred over the years. You may be accustomed to something because it has always been that way, but a fresh set of eyes might help you see ways to improve the facility, often with little cost.

Accessing the Nature of Obsolescence

The closets, storage rooms and basements of America are filled with computers that still work as well as they did they day they were manufactured. Absolutely nothing is electronically or mechanically wrong with them; yet they are functionally obsolete. They still work with the software they were born with, but no one wants to use that software anymore; and their hard drives, RAM, and lack of peripheral equipment can't keep up with the latest software.

Your pool may be similarly obsolete; and before you decide to renovate or replace, you should understand and be able to recognize the two kinds of obsolescence.

Physical Obsolescence

Physical obsolescence usually means your facility is simply worn out. The shell may be cracked and leaking, deck surfaces are splaying, concrete slabs heaving, recirculation and supply pipes are rusting and leaking, filter systems are malfunctioning, the bathhouse roof is leaking, the parking lot is crumbling, light fixtures are broken. These are a few of the many conditions that describe a facility that has lived beyond its useful life. All these things can be repaired, of course; but at what cost and to what end?

Often, physical obsolescence can occur for reasons other than deterioration, and usually, as a result of changing safety and health codes. Perfectly operational filtration systems can become obsolete as a result of a change in turnover rate requirements. A 10-hour turnover rate was uncommon 30-40 years ago Subsequently standards dropped to eight hours, and in many states today, a six-hour turnover rate is preferred.

Pool shells that are tight as a drum have become obsolete because of changing safety requirements for water depth below starting blocks and diving boards. Acceptable water depths under starting blocks used to be 3-1/2 to 4 feet when many of the nations pools were built in the '50s. Today, in the states of Texas and Michigan, 6-foot depths or greater are required These standards may be adopted by other states and could become the standard for future designs. Diving wells, hopper design and board configuration are also experiencing new safety codes to further minimize risk of cervical injury and impact with the pool bottom. Even bathhouses and entryways have become physically obsolete as a result of new health and safety code and ADA standards for freedom of access.

Safe lighting levels, GFI protection and other electrical requirements have also changed with updated codes through the years. Again, all these things can be fixed repaired or replaced; but at what cost and to what end?

Functional Obsolescence

It is possible—and undoubtedly has been done—to build a brand new swimming pool that is still obsolete. "Insanity," it has been said, "is the process of doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." You can build a new rectangular swimming pool with a 10-foot deck surrounded by chain-link-fence; but unless your study of the community has revealed this to be their wish, then you shouldn't expect any significant improvement in attendance and revenue. Your pool will be physically perfect, but may, on opening day, be functionally obsolete.

Attendance erosion and revenue decline, resulting in increased subsidy, are all indicators of functional obsolescence. Recreation is a perishable commodity and needs to continually be refreshed to maintain popularity. If patrons no longer find it fun to use your facility and if it is no longer attractive to the market compared with other recreational opportunities, people will stop coming.

Functional obsolescence might begin with the static, rectangular body of water, but it can also implicate the narrow deck, the entrance through the bathrooms and showers, the isolated kiddy pool and the chain-link fence with the picnic area on the other side. Today, the expectations for aquatic recreation in most communities include zero-beach entry to shallow free-form bodies of water featuring waterslides, interactive play features, current rivers and bubble benches. Wide, inviting decks provide ample opportunity for socializing in sun or shade, with grassy areas, trees, shrubs and flowers giving the facility a park-like environment and pushing back to fences to the point of near invisibility.

Customers' expectations can also lead to functional obsolescence of your entrance and bathhouse. People don't expect to be led through the bathrooms on the way to the pool area anymore. Patrons also look for diaper changing areas, family changing rooms and more fixtures than what were provided in facilities built 30 years ago. In some cases, changing health codes make issues of physical obsolescence. But whether they are demanded by code or expected by customers, obsolescence is the result.

Mechanical systems, too, can be functionally obsolete from the operator's point of view. Older manual systems may get the job done, but automated systems available today make it much easier to accurately and efficiently monitor water quality and perform other maintenance procedures. Continuous monitors sample water every few seconds, automatically and immediately making system adjustments to minimize problems and maximize safety. If something gets out of whack, the systems can contact the operator by pager or phone. They can even backwash themselves. The lack of these features might not make for physical obsolescence; but in an environment where saving labor costs and maximizing efficient use of energy and materials is vtital, it can add to conditions making a facility functionally obsolete.

Food services can also have an element of functional obsolescence. Today, more sophisticated, efficient food delivery systems provide a higher quality of food, with faster preparation and delivery, using minimal labor and expense. People expect these improvements as part of their recreation experience; anything less adds to a facility's functional obsolescence.

Renovate or Repl ace

Finding out what your community wants and accurately accessing the degree to which your facility provides it are the first steps toward reviving your community aquatics program. Weighing the different options available to you is the next step. Of course, maintaining the status quo is one option but is doubtful to provide any turn of fortunes.

So, for many people, renovation and replacement are the real choices. The seductive excitement of building a brand new state-of-the-art aquatic center usually gets first review, but frequently budgetary reality quickly sends designers back to the drawing boards. In these cases, the opportunities for vast improvements through renovation of an existing facility shouldn't be underestimated. "Supersizing" an existing facility can create dramatic improvements in recreational value and can increase attendance and revenues significantly.

A Case Study

In 1972, my father, Joe Hunsaker, designed a pool facility for the community of Shrewsbury in suburban St. Louis County, Missouri. The pool shared much in common with other community pools of its day—a 6-lane, 25-meter tank with a deep end featuring two 1-meter boards and a 3-meter board. Yet, it also had some unique features that the community liked, including a concrete "pensinsula" that jutted out into the shallow area of the pool, creating an ideal teaching platform as well as a place for seniors to congregate.

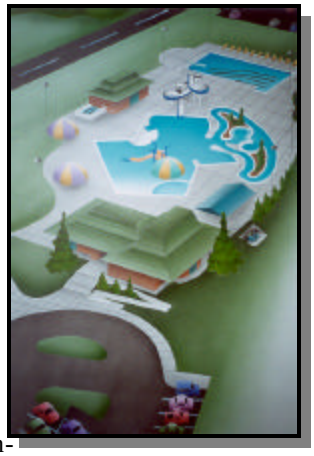
By the 1990s, however, the pool had become functionally obsolete, and in 1998, options were considered for its repair, renovation and replacement. Ultimately, the decision was made to "supersize" the pool, working as much as possible with the existing pool shell to maximize cost efficiency. We designed a pool inside the existing pool, converting it into a leisure pool with tot area, zero-beach entry, spray features, shade structures in the pool, interactive play systems and a single flume waterslide with a tower designed to accept a second flume in the future. We also recreated the teaching area that was so popular in the existing pool. Other features included a water vortex and a current river with senior seating area.

The community had a long history of competitive swimming, so a new 6-lane, 25-yard pool was added with recessed stairs and a 1-meter diving board. Original plans also indicated significant improvements to the bathhouse and food service areas; but subsequent budgetary restraints led to the decision to put the money into recreation features rather than support structures.

The "supersized" renovation created many of the amenities popularized by water parks and aquatic centers, while working within the budget restrictions of the community. And it was successful in turning Shrewsbury's aquatic programming around. In its first season, the pool enjoyed a significant increase in attendance and revenue, despite an unusually cool summer.

When considering the "supersizing" renovation option, it is important to carefully weigh the value of proposed improvements and prioritize them according to their likely affect on attendance and revenue. The parking lot, for example, may be showing some age, but people will not come to the facility because of its newly paved parking area. Similarly, people will be compelled to come to a facility because of its new bathhouse. Granted, those features may play a role in a person's decision *not* to come to the facility. But it will be the features with recreation value—the slides, park-like atmosphere and yes, maybe the 6-lane by 25-yard lap pool—that drives their decision to come. In the prioritization process, we don't want to put the revenue-generating features above the service features, unless they interfere with the overall safety, of the environment.

Also, when judging the worth of one option over another, consider not only the initial project costs, but how the long-term operating costs and revenues will be influenced. One option may cost substantially more than another, but increased attendance and higher fees justified by greater recreation value may improve the long-term financial picture of the option that, in the short-term, is more costly. A professional design consulting firm can help evaluate all these variables.



How To Get Started

If your pool is showing the signs of functional or physical obsolescence, the time to begin the process toward change is now. It may take 2-3 years to go through investigation, review, funding, design and construction stages of development, so the sooner you begin the process, the quicker you'll open the doors to your new or renovated aquatic center.

As stated before, start by documenting the state of your existing facility, including attendance and revenue histories, mechanical and structural maintenance issues. A professional design consultant can help conduct a facility audit to analyze the condition of your current facility and programming. The consultant can also prepare design options and individualized business plans for each option, describing the expected project costs, projected attendance and revenues, and ongoing maintenance, labor and other costs associated with the design proposals.

This report should also include an analysis of the existing competitive environment, existing and potential user groups and their expressed facility wants and needs, and a demographic study of the community reflecting population trends, income and other statistical evaluation of the community's potential to support the proposed facility.

This information will be invaluable, not only in helping you make an educated decision on what proposals to make to the community and civic leaders, but it will also help you educate them and provide background to help them come to a position of support for the proposals.

Ultimately, whether you repair, renovate or replace, it is important that you do so based on a solid understanding of your facility's capabilities, the wishes of patrons both present and potential and a clear view of the many possibilities that can be explored to create the aquatic programming your community deserves.

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