

HAVE A PLAN BEFORE TAKING THE PLUNGE

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All across the country, civic leaders and parks and recreation directors are meeting reality. If the following scenario sounds familiar, your community swimming pool may be in hot water. Your 30-year old concrete structure is crumbling, outdated filtration and chemical treatment systems are wheezing with age and competition from more modern aquatic attractions is draining your user base. The few remaining lap swimmers are complaining about fee hikes, as you operate at an unhealthy deficit.

Maybe you don't have an aquatic facility at all. And the natives are getting restless – and hot. They are demanding a modern family aquatic center just like the one in the neighboring county.

Buckling under the political heat, you cool tempers with vague promises of a great new state-of-the-art swimming facility. Crowds cheer and banners wave. Kids race home to change into their baggy swimsuits, and you return, triumphant, to your office, where you are left, suddenly, alone with a daunting reality. Where do you go from here?

Many local officials around the country are considering developing new aquatic centers for this communities. However, with all the unique complexities inherent in this type of facility – most are reluctant to dive in. Many are finding that the process is not scary, as long as they have the right plan.

Mapping Out Your Project

An entrepreneur would not approach a banker without first preparing a well-researched, thoroughly documented business plan that outlines the proposed undertaking and defines its products, markets and income potential. Recreation directors going before a city council for funding approval, must be prepared with the same kind of supportive materials and collateral information. After all, what you are doing, essentially, is starting a business. You'll have a physical structure to construct and maintain, programs to develop and direct, employees to hire and train, expenses and income to manage, financing options to consider – and in most cases, an investor (in the form of tax-paying constituents or city council) who will need to be convinced of the facility's appropriateness and financial viability.

A well-designed Enterprise Plan – a business plan for an enterprise not necessarily operated for profit – will describe how all those areas will be developed, operated and managed. Without it, you leave yourself open for all kinds of second-guessing, uninformed criticisms and misguided and unsupported concerns. With it,

you'll be able to answer all the questions, knowledgeably defend against the criticisms, and discharge the concerns.

Invaluable Tool

An Enterprise Plan, however, is much more than an instrument to help you attain consensus support and funding for your project. Long before you get to that stage, it will be invaluable as a tool to help you think about, shape and refine the project – and it focuses that process in the early stages when those refinements are easier and less expensive to perform.

Think of it as a map. Imagine you want to travel from New York City to San Francisco. There are two ways of negotiating the trip. One is, simply, to get in your car and head west. No doubt about it, if you keep following the setting sun, you'll eventually get there.

It would be more efficient, however, to use a map. To have a detailed plan when you leave, indicating where you are going to spend the night, how many miles you need to cover and what exits to take. Sure, you can still make some side trips, but in making those choices, you'll know how they are going to impact your arrival time, the cost of the trip and other factors.

An Enterprise Plan works the same way. It doesn't force you to stick to a prescribed route; you can change your itinerary anytime along the way. But the plan is detailed enough to evaluate decisions as you proceed and to let you know how they are going to impact the overall result. It gets you to your destination in the most efficient manner, minimizing costly backtracking. On your trip, the longer you go down the wrong road, the more time consuming and costly it will be to backtrack to the right road. Similarly, in the development of your facility, the further along you are in the development of the facility, the more costly the changes. The more changes you have to do twice, or do over again, the more expensive the whole project will become.

Cost of Making Decisions During Design Process

So the Enterprise Plan, like the map, is important in giving you a glimpse of the whole picture in the early stages of planning, encouraging interpretations and changes early in the development process when they can be made easily and relatively inexpensively.

Where to Begin?

It can seem overwhelming. How do you know what's right for your community? How do you determine the cost? If you build it, will they come? Who's going to pay for it? Creating an Enterprise Plan will help you begin to sort through these questions. Though the finished Enterprise Plan represents thorough, information-intensive work, it takes form in stages, with each succeeding step building upon the information acquired in the previous step. The following is a skeletal outline of the steps to consider in

developing an Enterprise Plan. You must, of course, build on each of these elements to create a framework that best fits your individual needs.

Design Programming

At the outset, this is nothing more than a description of what the facility will be and who will use it. Will it be an indoor or outdoor facility? A leisure pool with lots of water play elements and maybe a wave generator, a competition venue with racing lanes and a diving tank, or a combination of the two? Once these very general ideas are specified, you can begin to consider what your construction will entail and begin to project costs.

Construction and Project Costs

Again, in the initial stage of formulating ideas, this will be an estimate of costs to build projects similar to that described in the design programming stage. These costs include both construction – the brick and mortar, pipe and wire – and project costs like professional fees, engineering studies, legal expenses, contingency costs. Frequently, this stage serves as a reality check against the wish list characteristics of the initial design program, and often results in a return to the design program stage to eliminate or revise certain amenities.

Facility Programming

This part of the plan explains how you are going to program activities at the facility to accommodate all the various user groups, while generating the most revenue in the most cost-effective manner. Simply put, this stage identifies who will use the facility, and when. With a programming schedule in mind, you can then devise an operating structure.

Operating Structure

Once you've determined who is going to be using the pool and when, it's time to determine how and by whom the facility is going to be operated. What kind of organizational structure is going to be required to accommodate various user groups and supply the quality of service they expect? Who is going to hire and train the staff? Knowing the Who, When, and How will allow you to establish realistic budget and revenue projections.

Revenue Projections

The buzzwords in public facility planning these days are “financial responsibility.” Communities can no longer afford to subsidize recreational centers. Local governments and taxpayers can no longer afford an open checkbook. So, what can be expected in terms of revenue, and what, if any, will be the level of subsidy required? For this, you will need to begin a complete inventory of expenses.

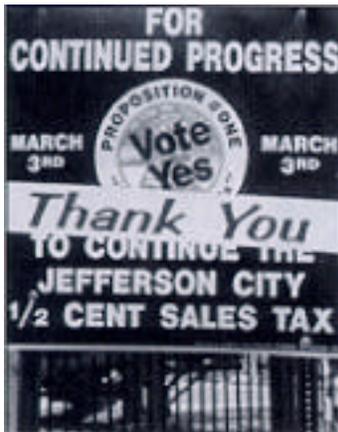
Expenses

What will be the ongoing costs of operation? How much will you pay for utilities, chemicals, air treatment, payroll, and insurance? These elements vary widely depending upon geographic areas, type of facility, seasonal use and other factors.

Each stage of the Enterprise Plan may require a re-visitation of opinions and concepts that were established in previous steps, refining the whole picture until, ultimately, the proposal best represents a facility capable of serving the needs of its users at a cost that will be acceptable to the community.

When it reaches that stage, all the elements will be in place for you to make a knowledgeable decision as to whether or not to pursue the development of the aquatic facility. If you and your staff or board decide that building is indeed a viable option, then that same Enterprise Plan will help to reinforce your position and help you to gain a consensus of support from those responsible for financing the project.

History is full of notorious public projects that have soared like eagles on paper, only to hang, once created, like albatrosses around the necks of taxpayers. By planning ahead, you can easily avoid that fate and create a facility that will serve the public well in the present as well as standing the test of time.



Jefferson City Memorial Park Swimming Pool

Faced with a rapidly deteriorating pool and plummeting attendance, the Jefferson City (MO) Parks and Recreation Department began investigating the possibility of building a new aquatic facility. They approached the facility design process cautiously. By using the steps outlined in the Enterprise Plan process, they were able to create a world-class family aquatic center that is bringing in visitors by the thousands.

After completing an extensive engineering study, officials asked engineers to develop a series of wide-ranging conceptual designs for them to consider. Design possibilities ranged from a bare-bones concept that would simply restore the pool to its 1948 condition, to a complete make over that would alter the entire shape of the pool and introduce new amenities. Construction and cost projections were laid out for each scenario so judgements and adjustments were easier to make.

Next, a feasibility study helped to analyze the needs and desires of the community. This market research considered elements such as programming opportunities, attendance, cash flow and revenue and expense projections for the newly operating facility.

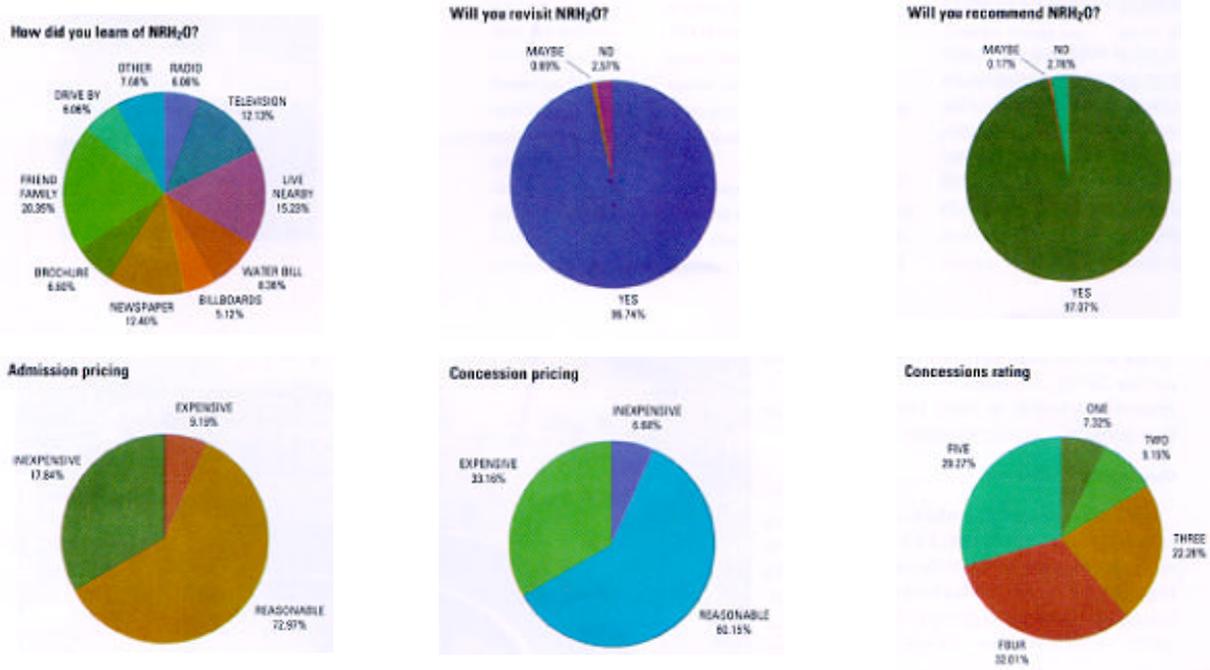
The final design included a modified 50-meter pool with water walks, play features, fountains, sprays, slides and lap lanes; a 200-foot water slide; a water spray waterfall; a separate baby pool; a renovated concession areas; and new decking, piping and recirculation equipment.

NRH₂O

After following a similar procedure, officials at North Richland Hills (TX) Parks and Recreation made the bold move into the municipally operated water park industry. Since its completion, the \$7.8 million NRH₂O facility boasts more than 150,000 visitors each summer.



Market analysis and feasibility studies helped recreation officials and designers create a family-oriented park that integrates attractions and activities for everyone. The park offers a leisure pool with water play structures, kids slides, sprays, log walk, and lily pads, a water playground, a wave pool; and an action river tubing ride. The entire area was designed as “park within a park” and includes green spaces, intricate landscaping and dry areas. Initial exit surveys indicate that the park is a great success.



Thornton, CO

Serving the Denver area communities, the new recreation center offers flexible aquatic programming with an indoor wave pool and separate leisure pool. The overall concept includes something for everyone.

Granite City, IL

In developing a new aquatic complex, the park district agreed upon a flexible design offering both recreation and traditional amenities. The basic eight-lane, 25-yard configuration grew to include zero beach entry, water sprays, body slide and teaching stations.

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