

Club Facility Guide

BC Summer Swimming Association

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SWIMMING | DIVING | WATER POLO | SYNCHRO

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Access to sport and recreation facilities in British Columbia, and swimming pools in particular, is an ongoing issue and one that is not likely to be solved in the immediate future. Indeed, as pool administrators are continually faced with the “cost recovery” message from city administration, the pinch becomes tighter and tighter on the facility’s user groups. There are some strategies and tactics that can be implemented which may provide your club with better pool access.

At the outset, one must be patient, creative, tactful and sincere, as the problem you are trying to solve has a long history. It is BCSSA’s desire to provide some tools, by which your Club may find success.

10.1 Understanding the Issue

Pools and their management seem to be an anomaly inside the recreation/leisure delivery system. The indoor pool presents its owners, usually a municipality, with a large tax burden. These costs are generated because of high staffing costs and high operational costs for heat, light and power.

Cost recoveries and revenues generally don’t meet expenditures for indoor pools. This imbalance is partially due to an expressed desire by the owners to maintain inexpensive access to the facility, thereby allowing as many segments of society as possible to access the pool.

The operational philosophy is further confused when one compares a pool with any other civic owned facility. There can be found no comparative documentation on the relative costs of operating ice rinks, theatres, schools, gymnasiums, soccer fields, science laboratories, highways and open spaces commonly known as parks. These publicly financed facilities tend to be operated under the general and broad taxation of their various governmental owners.

Pools are different. For some reason, pools have been singled out as having a culture, which relates to the operational cost of a facility. This pressure places most pool managers on the horns of a dilemma. How do they gain the greatest cost recovery while maintaining the broadest usage possible? To further cloud the process, recreational “philosophy” is somehow applied unequally in the recreation/leisure industry. This is reflected in the programming of arenas, curling rinks, fields and gymnasiums. In these facilities, the governmental owner normally provides capital and custodial staff, maintenance etc, and turns the facility over to user groups for programming, thus a large rental market of user groups dominates most of the available time in these facilities.

Pools are different. In most pools, the situation has developed where the owner has decided to provide the majority of programming and has also chosen to leave much of the time available, un-programmed for general public leisure usage. This is the opposite of what normally takes place in the rest of the recreation/leisure department. One merely needs to look in the last few pages of the recreation department’s programming guide to see the vast number of community programs that are provided by organized user groups that merely rent facilities from the various governmental agencies. This can be contrasted with the relatively low number of programs provided by the recreation/leisure department and the

school boards. It would be interesting to determine the number of people serviced by the professional programmers and at what cost, as compared to the volunteer driven community organized activities. This investigation is the subject for another paper.

Pools are different. Operational management of aquatic facilities has grown up over the years to accept the relatively high cost with little or no creative thought being given to unique or novel ways of improving the situation. To give dimension to this problem, the average deficit on a pool is conservatively \$200,000 per year. There are over 100 indoor pools in BC. They have been creating this operational deficit for the last ten years. This translates in round figures to a public debt created by our aquatic facilities in the range of \$20 million. The necessity of dealing with the access issue needs to be seen in the context of our current operating practices and styles that will not afford us the luxury of continuing to incur this kind of debt.

In other parts of the world, pools are contracted out or programmed to generate the greatest amount of revenue while incurring the least amount of cost. We have an excellent example in Canada of this concept at the Talisman Centre Complex in Calgary.

Ideology further clouds the issue when it's pointed out that most aquatic centre users have no desire to use the "square" tank for fitness purposes and we are constantly reminded how many pool users have neither desire nor ability to use water that is more than waist deep. As a nation concerned with fitness and lifestyle, one would want to question the practices that have been encouraged in teaching the art of swimming in BC over the last 40 years if so few of our citizens actually know how to swim. The inability to swim has been turned, in the last 15 years, to the desire for the average user to recreate or have leisure time. The installation of hot tubs, saunas, and slides, while having added amenities and thereby increased revenue, have not dealt with the simple issue that pools are designed to be swum in. In the desire to provide passive leisure opportunities it has become the style to try and create a tropical beach scene out of concrete and plastic palm trees. The articulated philosophy is that the majority of the customers want leisure. The market place, when identifying revenue streams, seems to want fitness opportunities, lesson programs, and competitive opportunities. Today's pool manager is surrounded by all of these conflicting philosophies, issues and problems.

There may be other reasons that are more localized issues that restrict the access to facilities, but in the main, this is the milieu in which programming decisions are made. The individuals governing recreation and pools have not decided what business they are in.

10.2 The Players

As most pools are owned by municipalities, this document shall concentrate on the municipal structure and decision making process.

Mayor and Council

These are the most senior and most dominant policy makers in the community. Due to the nature of politicians, being elected, their first priority is usually to get re-elected. Aquatic clubs have been remiss in not developing appropriate and sympathetic relationships between their elected politicians and their club. There are many valuable services that the club provides, including, but not limited to, positive youth programming, leadership development, fitness, moral and ethical education, employment, economic stimulus, and a good image for the community when the team travels or hosts competitions. Clubs that are politically active and have “the ear of the mayor” tend to have greater accessibility to problem solve, than those who do not have such access.

Recreation Commission

The Recreation Commission is usually appointed, rarely elected. The purpose of this group is to represent the broad community and advise the Mayor and Council on recreational policies. This group acts as a buffer between recreation and the Council. Depending upon the structure and function of this group, they should not be overlooked as being courted as strong allies to the club’s cause. However, due to the fact that they are not politically motivated, they can and in fact, have been less than sympathetic to aquatic clubs concerns. This group generally tends to look to the senior staff for guidance and direction. In almost all cases, the Commission is advisory only and has no final authority. Be sure to familiarize yourself with both the formal and informal role that this group plays in the decision making process. It is also necessary to clearly define the authority and reporting relationships of your Commission. These relationships are both to the Council and to the staff of the Recreation Department.

Bureaucrats – The City Manager

The City Manager is usually the Chief Executive Officer and the highest civil servant on the totem pole. There are a variety of names for this position and it may be confusing, but it is advantageous to find out who this person is. This person is normally a manager who has a large number of other managers reporting to him or her. These people can make life wonderfully easy, or very difficult, depending upon their orientation to your issue. Determine how close the highest civil servant in the Recreation/Leisure Department is to the City Manager. This can be determined formally by reviewing organizational charts and relative budget percentages that are expended on recreation. It is probably more important, though, to determine the informal fit or “feel” that the bureaucrats have for sport. This process only determines how much education is required to ultimately win your point.

Non-Recreation Bureaucrats

Cities, by their nature, are large bureaucratic organizations. Many of the decisions that you are trying to get your city to make may be impacted by other departments, such as planning, social programming, and public works to name a few. It is imperative that you clearly establish and understand those working relationships and interdependencies.

Head of Recreation

In every municipality there is a supreme being for recreation. This person goes by a variety of titles, but is generally charged with the responsibility for operating the recreation/leisure/parks programs and budgets. In this industry, it is important to understand the packing orders and learn how to "line up your ducks". This person, however, has a number of departments reporting to him or her, as there are many structures to these departments with many job titles. Somewhere in there, the person responsible for the pool(s) reports to the Director of Recreation. A number of other departments besides the pool would also report to the Director of Recreation like parks, arenas, theatres, museums etc. may all report to this person. Again it is important to understand both the formal and informal relationships between these various departments.

Pool Manager

The Pool Manager has the overall responsibility for the pool and its programs. He/she is responsible and accountable for the budget and trying to meet and satisfy all the competing and conflicting demands. Pool Managers are people. They develop attitudes and opinions about aquatic clubs just like everyone else. It is important to determine what makes this person tick in terms of his or her philosophy towards recreation and sport. This personal attitude or belief will be reflected in how the pool is programmed.

Programmer

Most facilities these days have a pool programmer who deals with the day to day bookings and operations of the aquatic facility. This person often has a philosophy towards recreation. Normally the programmer has to have all programs approved by the pool manager. It is usually here that all requests for facility usage begin. These individuals also tend to hear directly from the lifeguards about all of the activities your athletes are involved in, either good or bad, while they are at the pool.

Lifeguards

These front line troops, while they might have once been competitive aquatic athletes, often have a changed outlook with regard to the competitive aspect of sport. They may not be predisposed to helping or supporting the club. Many of these individuals are young, part time, and in their first work experience. Typically they will have a very egocentric approach to their job and tend to "police" the pool environment, rather than act as a "host" in the pool. They are the front line troops and can go a long way toward making your time in the pool a rewarding experience. Do all that you can to cultivate a great relationship with your lifeguards and instructors!

The Process

Requests for pool bookings normally come in to the program coordinator and then go to the pool manager for final approval. In understanding something of the process, your club may be able to better use the system to attain its goals.

Chain of Command

Always determine the chain of command in the decision making tree. Always follow the chain of command, so that you can't be turned back at any step in the bureaucratic plodding. Remember, you are going up the ladder until you can get to the person that can say yes. The problem with most of our clubs is they stop at the first person who tells them no and they take no for an answer. That person is usually the pool manager.

Documentation

Remember, you are dealing with a bureaucracy that lives on the interoffice memo. All requests should be in writing and the summary of all discussions should be forwarded to the party involved. They should always open with the lines like, "To summarize our discussion of.... (Whatever meeting), and finish with, "If you are not in agreement with this summary, please advise." The process here is to create a paper trail that clearly demonstrates that you have followed proper procedure and that you are simply looking for professional, competent and consistent management.

Long Term

The challenge you have taken on is not only for your kids that are in the water today, but for kids that are coming in future years, so be in for the long haul. Pool time tends to be allocated and then maintained as traditional club time. As a policy, never give any back. This part takes patience. It may take you years to get what you started out to get, so don't quit because someone else will have to start over at the beginning.

Facts and Philosophies

Most council(s) rely heavily on their civic staff to provide them with numbers, so make sure that your facts and numbers are accurate and irrefutable. You need to be "more expert than the expert." You have the inside edge, use it. You have a single cause, while the city staff has many to juggle. If your case is well prepared, you can win the day. The civic staff are going to bring forward facts and figures to try and negate your request, and these facts and figures will support their recreation philosophy. You MUST be able to refute both their numbers to show that your program meets the department's philosophy in a more cost effective manner.

Recording the Numbers

Every time your request is denied, make sure that you get the reason why in writing. This will allow you to build a case around the stated philosophy versus the implementation of that philosophy.

Contracts

It is preferential to have a written contract for your pool time. Most facilities are reluctant to do so, and that is a great advantage to the facility manager who can wheel and deal with your time because you have nothing in writing. A letter of understanding is acceptable, but lacks some of the binding qualities of a contract. Check with other facility users such as hockey, art groups etc. to see if it is city policy to have contracts for facility usage. Ensure that your contract covers both meet and practice times and that your club adheres to the letter of the contract, especially when it comes to notifying the pool of time that you won't be requiring.

It may also be informative to determine what services are going to be provided for swim meets. Clubs often get charged for set-up and take down, both in staff time and a surcharge. Determine if this policy holds true in other municipalities. If this policy doesn't exist in other municipalities, work to eliminate it in your pool.

Going to Council

If you have worked your way up the bureaucratic chain and haven't yet received satisfaction, it's time to go to Council. There are those of you that may wish to start here, but unless you have a political "in" on Council, your request will be referred back to a Committee or staff member. In your submission, you should indicate clearly what your problem is and all of the steps you have taken to try and resolve it. This demonstrates that your matter is not trivial and that you value Council's time. Your issue is an important one. As a volunteer, a voter, and a member representing a community group, that fact will not be lost.

Be Positive: Normally the issue of your club's pool time is not worth becoming the indignant taxpayer. You should present your case positively and keep your criticism to a minimum. Your task is to identify the issue that a current municipal policy renders your Organization ineffectual.

The Alternative: Always present an alternative after you have identified the problem. The alternative should always be one that is to your advantage, solves your problem and is couched within the broad parameters of the recreation department's philosophy.

Cost it Out: Be sure that you have included a cost analysis of how your solution allows the City to better meet the recreational mandate while saving them money.

Sell the Benefits: It is important to make an emotional appeal to the politician and sell your solution on the merits that implementation will bring to the community. These benefits would include such things as more kids involved, more coaches trained, more volunteers developed. REMEMBER, you're a good news, good work, youth oriented, and community volunteer group. You represent X number of taxpayers and voters. You are an organized, special interest group and if not dealt with effectively, have the potential to grow into a politician's worst nightmare.

Written Presentation: Ensure that your submission to Council is clearly written, short and to the point. In this submission you should lead to and suggest a policy change.

Lobbying Council: There is some value in lobbying individual Council members. You can test the political wind by phoning these specific individuals; explain your position and seek their advice. If you have not proceeded through the bureaucratic chain of command, the likelihood of sending you to the starting gate is very high.

Dialogue: You may not win after all this. However, you have opened up a dialogue which must be continued until you have reached satisfaction. Remember, the squeaky wheel gets the grease.

10.3 Winning Hearts and Minds

The situation that you have inherited has a long history and certain attitudes and perceptions have developed over time. One of the first things you need to do is to get people to understand that the club is taking a new approach and you need to get as much support and good will behind your project as possible.

Pool Behavior: Get your coaches, athletes and parents to be exemplary in their treatment of the pool, facility, its staff and its other patrons. You want to be a model Organization.

Supply Services: There are many things that your club can offer to the pool and its staff. Joint equipment purchases, in-service training for their staff, joint promotions around National Fitness Week, supporting the pool manager's agenda at City Council are, but a few things that your club can do to help the facility be your supporter.

Partnerships: Attempt to form partnerships between other pool user groups and coordinate their requests and applications. The larger the constituency of the user group, the more likely the positive the response will be. This also prevents the divide and conquers scenario and the "if we do it for you, we have to do it for everybody" scenario.

10.4 Summary

Advisory Committee: Establish a pool users advisory committee to give guidance to the program manager and pool manager in their allocation of water time. These citizen committees are effective in many areas. Start yours today.

Political Placement: Strategize for the placement of one of your members or former members on the Recreation Commission and/or on City Council.

Political Action: If the politician knows that your group is politically motivated, the likelihood of your issue having a positive outcome goes up greatly. For those clubs that choose to be non-partisan (it's probably prudent to maintain) the members can actively participate by providing drivers on voting day to bring out the electorate.

Media and Public Relations: Your club should have something in the local paper on a weekly basis. This keeps your club's name in front of the politicians. You could also try exposing the club to as much community publicity as possible, by participating in parades, community rallies and other events where the community can actually see the faces of your kids.

Planning Your Strategy: Clearly state your facility access issue and identify the players throughout the hierarchy. Know who to go to next, and when. Map out the decision making and planning process in your Community. Know who can say yes, and who can't. Collect the data and validate the numbers. Decide on your approach. Put your plan to action!! Follow-up, follow-up and follow-up.