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Here's the simple truth: If your facility relies on subsidies, it's at risk. Follow these five steps to get off the dole and get on the road to recovery.

Addicted to Subsidies?

GRAPHIC BY NICK ORABOVIC

Nationwide we continue to hear the latest news: Public facilities closed due to city, county and state financial challenges. It's clear we are in changing times with a new mind-set. Gone are the days when public facilities relying on heavy subsidies will be allowed or even accepted. The public sector community must change its operational mode to survive in today's economic climate. The simple reality is this: The more your facility relies on subsidies, the more likely it is to get the budgetary ax. Consider using the following five operational changes to break your dependence on subsidies.

1 Accept that subsidies are not a given. Rather than assume that subsidizing operational costs is a foregone conclusion, the public sector should focus on becoming sustainable and fiscally responsible. That said, I'm not arguing that each and every aquatics facility become a for-profit entity. It's unrealistic to ask everyone, regardless of location, offerings and age, to drop subsidized funding.

Instead, I'm urging all public aquatics facilities to maximize revenue opportunities and minimize costs. That requires a committed and serious approach to operational efficiency combined with a balance of appropriate user rate structure, program offerings and facility marketing.

2 Review user fees. When looking at revenue potential, it's all too common for a public facility to have user fees that are not in line with other recreational offerings, and almost certainly not parallel with their counterparts in the private and commercial environment. For the sake of comparison, let's look at the price structure of public recreation offerings of an unnamed Midwestern community. The cost for a summer youth baseball program with a season of 12 games, is $95. The cost to visit the outdoor city-owned aquatics facility is $4 per visit, or $60 for a seasonal pass. If the average baseball game is two hours, the current cost structure equates to approximately $3.95 per recreation hour. If the average length of stay at the aquatics facility is the same two hours, the cost per recreation hour becomes $2.

When extending the average length of stay at the aquatics facility, or utilizing the cost of a seasonal pass, the cost per recreational hour is reduced to pennies. Again, this should not suggest that every single public facility should raise its user rates. Rather, I encourage you to review your current price structure for determination of consistency with other publicly provided recreation opportunities as appropriate within the community.

3 Diversify programming. Staying current with program trends is important. Facilities must continue to be willing to modify or update the programs that are provided, as well as the times and frequency with which they are offered. Expanding aquatics programs by reaching out to groups such as adults and seniors through fitness and wellness programs is just one way to expand your services.

Take advantage of times when there might be overlap in your aquatics programs, such as children's swim lessons and adult aerobics. This can be an opportunity to increase participation. After all, why should a child's mom, dad, grandma or grandpa sit in the shade reading their book while their child participates in swim lessons when they could be exercising, too?

Even in situations where a public facility has established a diversified activity schedule, it's often fear of the unknown that keeps some people away. Consider reducing program fees, or possibly offering a program for free for a limited time. Fees are the ultimate excuse for a nonuser, so once you remove them, you also often remove a major hurdle. Typically, once a potential user has participated in aquaerobics, fitness, therapy or other aquatic programs, retention of these users can be high. Now they're engaged and interested, and are more likely to return.

4 Get self-promotional. Why is it that in the public sector, facility programs and services frequently are not perceived to have a strong need for self-promotion? A committed effort to advertise and market your facility and its programs can result in significant changes in attendance numbers. Far too often a public facility has limited, if any, advertising in local newspapers, radio and TV. Ads for special user rate days and times, programmed special events, rental opportunities and the like have become a necessity in maximizing revenue.

As new and innovative recreational opportunities come into the marketplace, competition for discretionary dollars is fierce. In your next budget, I strongly suggest putting in costs for advertising and marketing. Attendance directly tied to such campaigns often can be tracked, and experience has shown that the cost associated with advertising traditionally will be covered through increased attendance or program use.

Social media outlets have become a great tool for immediately getting your message out, and can become a cost-effective tool for communication and promotion. Utilizing these resources can be an effective, inexpensive way to not only market your facility to the everyday user, but also a great tool for updating the public on your current programs and activities.

5 Look for new cost cuts. I've visited far too many aquatics facilities and witnessed numerous lifeguards not actively on duty, gathering or socializing. If you find yourself dealing with ongoing discipline or horseplay issues, chances are, you may be overstaffed. A guard rotation that will limit staffers in a non-guarding situation may be necessary to reduce your labor costs. Nor does the staff monitoring slide towers, concessions and ticket areas typically require a certified guard.

When it comes to costs associated with utilities, the implementation of maintenance and energy savings practices have gone from being a green approach to everyday practice. Capital cost investments on things such as variable frequency drives for pool pumps; use of pool covers; high-efficiency pool heaters; and installation of regenerative media filtration are just a few of the steps you can consider to reduce operational expenses. Plus, repairs of leaking pool tanks and piping can save significantly on water, energy and chemical costs.

Lastly, yearly negotiations with multiple providers of your pool chemicals, food services, insurance, and other commodities and contractual services will promote a competitive environment, ensuring you're getting the most for your money. ■

THE AQUATICS X FACTOR VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

With municipal budgets so tight, it may seem nearly impossible to get money for a new facility or renovation. Scott Hester and a group of aquatics operators say otherwise. This group, which has found creative ways to fund aquatic projects, will be part of a live round-table discussion at this year's *Aquatics International* Virtual Conference, "The Aquatics X Factor: Unleash the Power of Water." The round table will be followed by a Q&A session. This special seminar will launch Nov. 9 at 11 a.m. PST. To participate in the Q&A, you must attend then. Otherwise, it will be available on demand for six months following the live launch.

For more information, or to send in a question or register for our FREE conference, go to *aquaticseducation.com*

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