

Pool Renovation

CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

by D. Scot Hunsaker



The conversion of an antiquated 1948 municipal pool into a world-class family aquatic center has brought residents back in droves to the Jefferson City, MO., Memorial Park Swimming Pool.

In 1948, residents of Jefferson City, MO., saw a dream come true when construction of the Memorial Park Swimming Pool was completed. Set in scenic, wooded surroundings near the Missouri River just a short drive from the state capitol building, the new facility at Memorial Park was typical of the best public pool of the day. The 50-meter-by-25 yard rectangular pool was a place where kids could learn to swim, dive and compete. Despite its spartan amenities, recreational users joined competitive swimmers in droves, making the pool one of the city's most popular summer attractions.

By the mid-1980's, though, the dream had become a frustration for Jefferson City Parks and Recreation Department. The facility was starting to show its age, both in terms of failing equipment and in the inability to remain competitive with more modern,

exciting leisure-time options. Attendance began to plummet at the same time maintenance and operating costs were escalating. By the end of the decade, city officials decided it was time to rebuild the dream.

A preliminary engineering report of the pool's existing conditions was prepared in 1989. It showed that the pool decks were spalling from years of freeze/thaw cycle, the old and dilapidated underwater recirculation equipment was subject to frequent breakdowns and did not meet current turnover rate requirements, the manually operated

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chemical system did not meet industry standards, and the roofless bathhouse represented a dirty, unattractive obstacle through which all patrons had to pass. A narrow 10-foot deck bordered by a chain-link fence completed the uninviting scene, giving it the visual appeal of a backyard dog run, typical of most pools of that era.

That was the bad news, yet there was one substantial piece of good news – the 50-meter by 25-yard concrete pool shell was a conservatively engineered solid structure upon which to build. Whatever the resulting renovation would include the existing pool shell would represent a substantive expense savings for Jefferson City residents. The problem was not structural deterioration of the concrete structures, according to Bill Lockwood, parks and recreation director, but that the obsolete design had reached the point that the facility could not accommodate the preferences of citizens, and was actually offensive in many ways.

The engineering study complete, the next step was to explore the facility's potential. The design team developed five wide-ranging conceptual designs for consideration, from a bare-bones scenario that would simply return the facility to its 1948 condition – updated only as required to meet modern codes – to a complete best-case overall, altering the shape of the original pool and adding water entertainment amenities, including a lily pad walk, zero-depth beach entry, drop slides and body slides, and a lazy river and adult whirlpool area. At each stage, schemes were supported by a preliminary cost estimate detailing construction and project costs necessary to accomplish the new level of service being provided to the community.

The feasibility study took the process one logical and valuable step further – analyzing the needs and desires of the market area and entering that information into the overall equation. The analysis included historical operating records, showing the decline of attendance and financial performance under the existing facility; an analysis of the market area to determine programming opportunities needed for each scheme and how the community would be able to use and interact with each of the facilities; and attendance and cash-flow projections, including revenue and expenses, for each of the five schemes.

Armed with this information, the parks and recreation department and political leaders, in working to obtain funding for the project, could thoughtfully compare the alternative design schemes, making educated and knowledgeable decisions based not just upon initial construction and operating costs, but upon a total financial performance picture and improved service to the community.

A year and half later, sales tax funds of \$1.5 million were approved by voters for the project and design firms were asked to return to the drawing boards for a sixth scheme. As is often the case, the final design borrowed some of the best features from all the previous suggestions, while relying heavily on the cost-saving benefits of utilizing the existing pool shell. It was a compromise aimed at meeting as many user-group requirements as possible within the city's budget, but which sacrificed very little while accomplishing much.

The final design included:

- A modified 50-meter pool, using the existing pool as a shell and adding a zero-depth entry, water walks, participatory play feature, fountains, sprays, a drop slide and conventional learn-to-swim and lap-swim space.
- A 200-foot water slide, originally planned with a separate splashdown pool, but now included in the design of the 50-meter pool.
- Lily pads manufactured and designed with materials fabricated in the field to reduce construction costs.
- A low-cost water-spray waterfall.
- A separate baby pool featuring its own participatory water features and zero-depth environment.
- A renovated concession area and bathhouse, which provided an enclosed, safe structure that was both visually and functionally more friends.
- New decking, piping and recirculation equipment.

When the Memorial Park Family Aquatic Center opened its doors in 1994, it was clear that even with a very restricted budget, the parks and recreation department had successfully transformed an old concrete frustration into a state-of-the-art facility. The only question remaining was, would the community wake up to the renovated center?

Anyone who has followed similar projects in recent years knows the answer was predetermined. The old 1948 pool, like similar facilities across the nation, had been on a downward attendance spiral. At its peak in the early 1970's the pool had attracted summer attendance levels of more than 50,000 swimmers. By 1989, the year the project

was initiated, attendance had dropped to half that, and in the old facility's last summer of 1993, a dismal 13,962 was recorded.

At the same time attendance was dropping, costs were rising, causing the city's per-participant subsidy level to skyrocket from \$1.06 per individual in 1986 to nearly \$2.00 in its final year.

Under the original renovation plan, it was projected that with basic cosmetic and mechanical repairs to the old pool, a slight attendance increase to 22,000 would be realized. The more elaborate aquatic center plans carried with them significantly greater projections, ranging from 42,000 to 58,000, depending on the degree to which they were implemented.

What was the final result? Even though the final plan represented a dramatic reduction of earlier designs, the citizens of Jefferson City responded more enthusiastically than had been imagined. Attendance in the first month surpassed the entire final season of the old pool. By July's end, attendance figures had reached 34,952 and were on a strong pace to surpass the projected figures of much more elaborate plans.

Additionally, concession revenues the first two weeks of the 1994 season surpassed those of the entire 1993 season; by the end of July, they had combined with admissions revenues to bring in \$122,800. With expenses tallying \$140,681 the facility has successfully cut the city's subsidy level to \$.51 per participant.

Thanks to creative design and a forward-thinking parks and recreation department, residents of Jefferson City are enjoying a world-class family aquatic center right in their own community.

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