

Commissioners

From: Paul Belanger <montanaphenology@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, January 8, 2014 8:58 AM
To: Commissioners
Subject: Bitterroot Aquatic Center Concerns
Attachments: January 8 BAC letter to the commissioners.docx

Dear County Commissioners,

I am sending you a letter (attached) in regards to concerns I have over the operations and future plans for the Bitterroot Aquatic Center. I welcome the opportunity to discuss these concerns with one or more of the Commissioners and the Bitterroot Aquatic Center Board and staff.

Sincerely

Paul Belanger
Hamilton, MT

January 8, 2014

Dear Ravalli County Commissioners,

I am contacting the Ravalli County Commissioners as a concerned community member in regards to the operations and plans for future construction at the Bitterroot Aquatic Center (BAC). My concerns stated in the enclosed letter are not personal, rather from a concerned community member who supports the development of a community aquatics center that meets the diverse needs of our community. I voted for the BAC and the tax on my property to support the BAC and I am a strong supporter of aquatics programs and the swim team. Swimming is a life skill that once developed supports healthy lifestyles, expands an individual's recreation opportunities and much more.

There are three primary concerns that I want to bring to your attention: 1) Pool Fees, 2) Building/expansion and original master plan, and 3) Overall operations and maintenance.

Pool fees

Current pool fees are a major concern as they do not seem to be consistent with pool fees in other communities when you compare what is offered and what is actually charged. As you can see below, when comparing with facilities in Missoula and Columbia Falls, it seems difficult to justify the BAC fees when you see what services are provided in return for those fees. When compared with these two facilities, the BAC offers the least services yet charges fees that match or even exceed those charged at the Missoula Aquatic facilities which, offers the most aquatics opportunities to a community.

The BAC provides one indoor therapy warm water pool and one five lane outdoor 25 yard pool with two water slides that pale in comparison to the water slides offered at other aquatic facilities.

Splash Montana in Missoula provides three (3) 3-story water slides; zero depth wading area, spray features and kiddie slide, lazy river, several floating features and a 50 meter and 25 yard pool (8 lanes).

The Columbia Falls facility, a community of similar size to the central Bitterroot Valley provides spray features, zero depth wading area, playground and a large deck area and a five lane 25 meter outdoor pool.

Here is a comparison of daily and season pass fees:

Daily entrance fees:

- BAC = \$5.50 adult and \$4.50 for 17 and under.
- Splash Montana (resident fees) Daily: \$5 adult; \$3.50 student; \$3.25 11 and under
- Columbia Falls: Daily: \$3 adult; \$2 6-18 yrs old; 5 and under \$1

Season pass fees:

- BAC = \$120 + \$35 each additional family; \$255 family of four; \$90 for kid.
- Splash Montana: \$124.25 adult; \$86.50 student and senior; \$75.50 11 and under; \$244 family of four
- Columbia Falls: \$55 family; \$32 individual; \$25 lap swim only for the season.

When developing the fee structure, did they compare with other aquatic centers in the region? If so, how can they justify the obvious discrepancy between the BAC services and fees when compared to places like Splash Montana? This raises much concern about the current management and board's

ability to make decisions that support a sustainable aquatics program in Ravalli County. These fees present problems for making the facility accessible to our community.

Building/Expansion plans and Master Plan

The plans for the BAC I understood would include facilities that support the wide diversity of programs and activities that modern aquatic centers provide. These include competitive swim team, private and group adult and child swim lessons, masters swim program, various therapeutic exercise classes, water polo leagues, kayaking lessons, scuba diving and perhaps most importantly, family recreation and swim time. A facility to support these types of activities include zero wade or shallow areas, competitive 5 lane pool, deep end with or without diving board, often fun spray or slide features and adequate deck space for rest and relaxation for the whole family. A modern aquatic facility in a community like Hamilton with a very active recreational culture and rather significant tourism influence should add value to our community. While this facility is better than nothing, it still is falling far short of its potential and runs the risk of becoming obsolete in the very near future.

To my understanding there has been no public review of the current expansion plans and that the expansion plans are not consistent with the original master plan. These questions and concerns are extremely important now more than ever since I learned that the BAC is currently making plans and raising funds to build an indoor 4 lane pool. This only confirms and elevates my concern that we are pouring money into a facility that will not meet the needs of the community, will not expand the opportunities for aquatics programs and recreation in our community and ultimately fail due to these reasons and its unsustainability. And, that the Board and Management of BAC is not operating with the best information, most comprehensive needs assessment and a very narrow view of the current and future uses of the BAC.

- Why build a four lane indoor pool when our community already has access to an indoor three lane pool? This does nothing to expand opportunities.
- Has there ever been a feasibility study for current and now the future plans? Where is it?
- Who on the BAC board conducted any research and site visits to other aquatic facilities?
- Have current plans and operations been open for public comment?
- Where is the master plan on the BAC website? Is it accessible to the public?
- What process was used to determine that current facilities and future facilities meet the fullest potential for supporting aquatic activities in a community of our size and demographics?
- It is difficult to understand the justification for building the current facility that serves such a small demographic of the Ravalli County community.
- The outdoor pool has almost no deck space, no kiddie/zero wade area, no significant deep end etc...

Overall operations and maintenance

For the majority of the 2013 outdoor pool season, the pool water was extremely dirty. Not just dirty but the visibility was so poor that often I could barely see my hand in front of me. There were hair balls and other large debris floating in the pool. The conditions were poor throughout the majority of the season. This was noted by several others including the members of the swim team of which my two kids are a part of. Several swim team members even had to see a doctor about skin conditions. Kids were regularly sick. While it is difficult to determine if these illnesses were directly related to the conditions in the pool, it is worth noting that in previous years when the water was relative clean, the incidents of these kinds of illnesses was far less.

I personally have managed pools and know that a clean and safe pool requires consistent and regular monitoring and adjustments. It is the most basic responsibility of pool operations and it is not rocket science. It is clear that the pool maintenance person and thus management were not properly tending to the most basic requirements of operations.

In addition, the diving blocks at the pool needed repairs and maintenance. Despite regular requests by coaches, the blocks were not repaired until they took the step to have someone come down from Missoula to look at the starting blocks when amazingly the BAC staff finally fixed the problem.

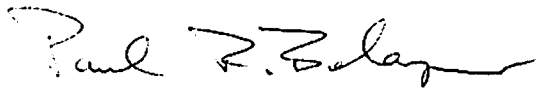
Swim team coaches and board expressed regularly throughout the season their frustration with the BAC management and lack of response from management to their concerns about pool cleanliness, equipment repairs and fees charged to the swim team. The swim team is over 100 swimmers strong - the largest swim team in the state - and most aquatic facilities welcome the participation of swim team as it expands the use of the facility.

My comments are supported by many others that I have talked with and reflect my informed knowledge of aquatic center operations and maintenance. I have spent my entire life around aquatic facilities across the nation. During my youth, I spent many summers at my community pool for recreation and as a competitive swimmer. I was a high school and collegiate All-American swimmer utilizing facilities from local community pools to state of the art aquatic centers used for recreation and competition. I worked as a lifeguard at YMCA, Private Country Club and public community aquatic centers throughout high school and college summers. I managed an aquatic facility and aquatics program for 3 years. In short, I have spent a majority of my life in and around pools and aquatic facilities and thus have a pretty good idea how aquatic facilities can serve the needs of the community, how a properly run aquatic facility looks and feels, and what is required to maintain a clean and safe aquatic facility.

My comments are not personal - I have never sat down with the BAC management or board. My comments are strictly about wanting to see our community make the most of an incredible opportunity to establish a county aquatics facility that supports the current and future needs and opportunities of our community.

I do not know if the Ravalli County Commissioners have any authority over the BAC planning and operations but I do hope that you will look into my concerns thoroughly and if possible hold off any support of the BAC until an adequate assessment and review of current operations and future plans is conducted.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Belanger". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Paul Belanger
Hamilton, MT