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Final effort for keeping pool open

By **Katie Liesener**/ Staff Writer
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Parents of children who swim at the Wayland Town Pool presented a proposal to the Park & Recreation Commission last week to limit pool use to swim team rentals only, a plan they hope could keep the pool open and running at a minimal loss long enough for a new one to be built.

"I think that going to rental-only didn't fit with the Park & Rec Commission's overall mission, so it wasn't fully pursued," said Cherry Karlson, a mother of three swimmers and one of the four parents who presented the proposal.

The commission voted to close the pool in August, and had "already headed down that road" until an outcry from swim team parents reopened the question this winter, said Nancy McShea, director of Park & Recreation.

Karlson said the pool's former practice of holding open swim periods for a handful of residents was not generating nearly enough revenue to cover the costs of the pool's operation. The parents' proposed plan, however, would adhere to a new golden rule: "Only be open when you can collect \$87.50 an hour."

That's the current rate paid by swim teams the Wayland Warriors, the Junior Warriors and the Natick Mighty Ducks.

The parents hope to attract additional renters to the pool, as well as save costs by eliminating the position of pool supervisor and looking into the possibility of changing the lifeguard/swimmer ratio from 1:20 to 1:25 for swim teams. (Town regulations stipulate the former ratio; state law allows for the latter.)

The parents also proposed keeping the pool open from November to March, but are considering changing to September to July if they can find a base tenant for that period, Karlson said.

The commission did not "necessarily feel comfortable" with the cutback in pool personnel, McShea said, and made two requests of the parents before the next meeting - that they collect letters of intent from interested renters and form a steering committee that could cover 50 volunteer hours of work a week in the absence of a supervisor.

According to Jeanne Downs, one of the parents who proposed the plan, the parents' group is already well on its way to meeting those goals.

Downs said several swim teams in the area that split their time among different local pools have expressed interest in having a "home base of operations" at the Wayland pool. And they already have the support of over 50 parents who have pledged to volunteer an hour or more a week.

But the potentially biggest obstacle remains.

Parents estimate that under their current proposal, the pool would operate at a \$21,000 annual loss. Though a significant improvement over the \$128,000 loss in fiscal year 2005, a loss of any kind is a fiscal sore spot when the town faces severe financial constraints in FY07.

"(The pool) is very difficult to justify as a town expense," Town Administrator Fred Turkington said in a December Selectmen's meeting.

Karlson said the estimated loss could be offset by summer rentals, and that at the very least, keeping the pool open would cost the town less than demolition, which is estimated at \$150,000.

If the pool were to be kept open, Karlson said, the demolition cost could be folded into the construction costs for a new community center, which the nonprofit resident group Wayland Aquatic Community Center Inc. (WACCI) hopes to build.

Jeff Aresty, a WACCI board member, said if a community center is built on the current town pool site, the pool's demolition costs would be "something best shifted over to the private groups as overall costs."

This coordination of efforts has resulted in an informal alliance between swim team parents and WACCI.

Both groups are looking at a similar timeframe as well. Karlson said the pool can be kept open no longer than two or three more years because of capital improvements required after that period. And WACCI hopes to have a center built in two-and-a-half to three years if a business plan is finalized and enough private support found in the upcoming year, Aresty said.

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In the meantime, parents must still wrestle with the uncertainty of attracting and maintaining renters for the pool.

Letters of intent are by no means contracts; if interested renters were to fall through, Karlson said, parents would be forced to "throw in the towel" at the end of the year.






But they show no sign of giving up for now. Because surrounding pools have mostly late-night hours available, Karlson and Downs fear that moving to a different pool would hurt attendance for the Junior Warriors, whose membership starts at age 5.

Parent Juliette Fay has one son on the Junior Warriors team and another, Quinn, who hopes to join someday when he gets older.

In a letter to the commission, Fay wrote, "Please, please don't close the pool. It will break Quinn's heart. And many others too."

The commission will cast its final vote on whether or not to close the town pool on Monday, Feb. 6.

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