

**DESD 12 MOUNT ALEXANDER SHIRE AQUATIC FACILITIES REVIEW - LATE ITEM (25/210/16)**

**1. Objective**

For Council to receive feedback from interested community members regarding the Aquatic Facilities Review, and consider the recommendations of the Review. This item is a 'Late Item' because officers were required to summarise and analyse public submissions, which closed on 24 August 2007. Officers were also required to brief Councillors prior to the report being prepared.

**2. Policy Implications**

*Including consideration of Economic, Social and Environmental impacts.*

The provision and development of aquatic facilities by Council is consistent with a number of objectives outlined within the 'Built Environment' and 'Community' sections of the Mount Alexander Shire Council Plan 2006-2010.

- 1.1 To improve the sense of safety and wellbeing within the community.
- 1.2 To plan for and coordinate a range of high quality services which respond to the needs of the community.
- 1.3 To provide an attractive and stimulating place with a high level of cultural vibrancy in which to live, work, visit and invest.
- 1.4 Provide and maintain infrastructure assets including quality landscapes and public spaces which meet community needs and expectations with a long term focus.

**3. Statutory Implications**

There are no specific statutory implications arising from this report. There are funding agreements in place with the State Government for funding that has been secured under the 'Better Pools' Grants Program for improvements to the Campbells Creek and the Castlemaine Pools. The Department of Planning and Community Development (formerly the Department for Victorian Communities) has provided Council with the opportunity to defer expenditure on these two facilities whilst a Council decision is made about their future. The Department of Planning and Community Development requires a final decision from Council in this regard by 30 September 2007.

**4. Background**

On 24 July 2007 Council formally received the Aquatic Facilities Review. Consultants *Sport and Leisure Solutions* were commissioned to prepare the Review following Council's request that further analysis of the Aquatic Facilities Task Group's recommendations be undertaken. On the whole the Review supported the recommendations of the Task Group, with the key recommendations being that a feasibility study into the development of an indoor heated aquatic facility be undertaken, and that Council decommission the Campbells Creek and Chewton Pools and should a new indoor facility be built decommission the Castlemaine Pool on a permanent basis within defined timelines. Council resolved to support in-principle the recommendations of the Review and to place the Review out for public comment for a period of 21 days. The timing of the public comment period was largely determined by the need to advise the Department of Planning and Community Development on 30 September about what Council intended to do with the 'Better Pools' Grants Program funds allocated for improvements to the Campbells Creek and Castlemaine Pools.

**5. Issues**

During the Review public comment period Council hosted a Public Forum and invited written submissions. Information about the public comment period and process was promoted in a range of ways detailed in Section 7 of this report.

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The public comment period ceased on 24 August 2007. Approximately 30 community members attended the Public Forum that was hosted on 15 August 2007, and 23 written submissions were received. Attachments DESD 12A and DESD 12B provide summaries of the feedback received via the Public Forum and written submissions.

Analysis of the feedback received via the Public Forum and written submissions has identified a number of key themes. The implications of the feedback received through the consultation process are discussed at the end of this section. The key themes from the consultation process included the following:

a) *Retention of existing pools*

Of the 23 written submissions received:

- 1 advocated for the retention of all existing pools.
- 10 advocated specifically for the retention of Chewton Pool.
- 2 supported the recommendation to decommission the Campbells Creek Pool on a permanent basis on the proviso that Council would commit to reinvesting in community recreation infrastructure in Campbells Creek within a specified timeframe.
- 4 supported the recommendations to close the Campbells Creek, Chewton and Castlemaine Pools in favour of the development of an indoor heated aquatic facility.

The main themes expressed in the written submissions and Public Forum regarding the retention of the existing pools were:

- the existing pools are highly valued as community social hubs.
- the existing pools afford ready access to safe, supervised aquatic environments and help to prevent community members from swimming in unsafe and unsupervised bodies of water such as dams, rivers and water races.
- the existing pools provide community members with affordable, local recreation opportunities.
- pools and their history contribute to the social fabric of towns and communities.
- the current management model where volunteers support the operations of the pools cannot be sustained in the long term because of the ever-increasing standards that volunteers are being required to comply with.

b) *Development of an indoor heated aquatic facility*

Of the 23 written submissions received:

- 3 did not support the development of an indoor heated aquatic facility.
- 11 supported the development of an indoor heated aquatic facility.

The main themes expressed in the written submissions and Public Forum regarding the development of an indoor aquatics facility were:

- the benefits for the community of an improved service across 52 weeks of the year versus the current 12 weeks of the year.
- it would better meet the broad spectrum of community members' needs, including the needs of children, families and older people, from learning, social, therapeutic and wellbeing perspectives.
- the provision of a 25 metre pool versus a 50 metre pool needs to be more thoroughly investigated, as does the provision of a warm water exercise pool.
- the design of such a facility needs to accommodate 'indoor / outdoor experiences'.
- a clear preference for such a facility to be sited within the vicinity of the existing Castlemaine Pool.

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Of the feedback received that did not support the development of such a facility, consistent questions that were raised included:

- why such a facility would be considered to be viable now when a report received in 1999 found that it was not.
- what impact the development of such a facility would have on rates and the opportunity cost of such a development.
- what impact the development of such a facility would have on the existing private operators of indoor heated pools within the Shire. (No submissions were received from the existing private operators).

c) *Management / upgrading of existing pools*

Of the 23 written submissions received:

- 2 supported the redevelopment of the existing Castlemaine Pool as an alternative to the development of an indoor heated aquatic facility.
- 1 advocated for the retention of all existing pools.

A viewpoint that was common to the written submissions and Public Forum regarding the management / upgrading of existing pools was that it would be cheaper to upgrade all of the existing pools than it would be to build one new, more centralised facility.

d) *Quality of the Review / timing of the public comment period*

Some community members commented on the quality of the Review and the timing of the public comment period. The main points can be summarised as follows:

- The Review provided a good overview of potential scenarios, and the process that was followed (ie: the establishment of the Aquatic Facilities Task Group and the opportunity to comment on the Review) was good.
- Some questioned the voracity of the attendance and financial data referred to in the Review, and asserted that there was too much anecdotal information.
- Some asserted that the Review was written with a deliberate bias towards an indoor heated aquatic facility.
- Some stated that the Review did not attend to community values.
- Some asserted that the public comment period was too short and did not allow for sufficient community debate and input regarding the recommendations contained within the Review.

Summary analysis

The Aquatic Facilities Task Group's recommendations and the public comment period have demonstrated that there is a level of community understanding about the difficulties of keeping the Campbells Creek Pool open. Representatives of the Campbells Creek Swimming Pool Committee of Management have indicated that they would welcome a decision about the facility's future. It would be appropriate for any Council decision to decommission the Campbells Creek Pool to include thoughtful and appropriate acknowledgment of the significant volunteer contributions that have been invested into the development, maintenance and operation of the pool over many years, and provide in-principle support for Council reinvestment into community recreation infrastructure in Campbells Creek within a negotiated timeframe.

There have been some vocal opponents to the recommendation to decommission the Chewton Pool on a permanent basis at the end of the 2008/2009 swimming season. Those community members who have been directly involved in operating the Chewton Pool over the past decade have indicated some frustration about the lack of volunteers at the pool. A community meeting held in Chewton on Thursday 6 September saw a number of people express interest in being appointed to the Chewton Swimming Pool Committee of Management and undertake to recruit new volunteers to support the

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operations of the Chewton Pool. The fact remains however that the Chewton Pool infrastructure is in poor condition and has a very limited lifespan. Attendance data for the facility also indicates very low visitation rates. These contributing factors suggest that it would be prudent for Council to support the recommendation to decommission the Chewton Pool on a permanent basis at the end of the 2008/2009 swimming season.

Should a decision be taken by Council to decommission the Chewton Pool, preliminary discussions with staff from the Department of Sustainability and Environment indicate that there is scope to redirect the remaining funding for the Shared Facility Project into improvements in other infrastructure located within the Chewton Soldiers' Memorial Park Reserve. An ability to demonstrate thorough consultation with key stakeholders would be a key factor in any approval of a request to change the scope of the expenditure of this funding.

The Task Group's recommendations, the Review and public comment period have demonstrated that there are grounds for Council to proceed with undertaking a feasibility study into the development of an indoor heated aquatic facility. The feasibility study should address a range of things that include but are not limited to an analysis of site options, cost to build and operate, funding options, component of community needs achieving an indoor / outdoor experience, 50 metre versus 25 metre pool development options and timeframes. It is also recommended that any feasibility study also include investigation into the redevelopment of the existing Castlemaine Pool as an alternative option should the development of an indoor heated aquatic facility be deemed to be not feasible.

With regard to comments about the quality and timing of the Review, the aim of the Review was to provide some additional analysis of the Task Group's recommendations. The Review was not intended to be a feasibility study in its own right, and it is for this reason that the attendance and financial data referred to in the report can be considered to be indicative only.

## **6. Financial and Resource Implications**

Any decisions about the future of aquatic facilities within the Shire will have significant financial implications. Whichever path Council chooses to take, funds will be required for the ongoing operation, maintenance and renewal of the facilities into the future.

Any feasibility study into a new indoor aquatic facility would incorporate a robust financial analysis to determine the likely capital and recurrent operational costs for such a facility. Council has the capacity to contribute \$50,000 from its 2007/2008 Budget towards the costs of a feasibility study. Industry advice indicates that a feasibility study of this nature is likely to cost in the order of \$30,000 to \$50,000. Matching funding from the State Government may be available to assist in meeting the costs of such a study.

Council currently has access to \$92,103 in State Government funds for the Campbells Creek Pool Refurbishment Project and \$239,493 for the Castlemaine Pool Refurbishment Project. The Department of Planning and Community Development needs to be informed about what Council intends to do with these funds by 30 September 2007. Council is able to request a change of scope regarding the expenditure of this funding however advice from Department of Planning and Community Development staff indicates that the likelihood of any change of scope request being approved is not great.

## **7. Consultation**

The Aquatic Facilities Task Group undertook some community consultation in forming its recommendations to Council. The recent consultation about the review included the following activities:

- Information being placed on Council's website under 'What's New'.
- Public Notices being placed in all local newspapers.
- Flyers being placed at many prominent locations across the Shire including Council service centres, BRIT and Continuing Education, Castlemaine and Maldon Neighbourhood Houses, Castlemaine Library, Castlemaine and District Community Health Centre (CHIRP), maternal and

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child health centres, hospitals, general and hardware stores, pre-schools and schools, post offices, service centre hubs (such as the Newstead Rural Transaction Centre), service stations and supermarkets.

- Media releases being prepared for the Bendigo Advertiser, Castlemaine Mail and Midland Express. (ABC Central Victoria, 3BOFM and WIN News also provided additional media coverage).
- Personal invitations to the Public Forum being sent to all members of the Aquatic Facilities Task Group and representatives of each Swimming Pool Committee of Management.

In addition, staff from the Department of Planning and Community Development and Member for Bendigo West, The Honourable Bob Cameron, have been kept abreast of the Aquatic Facilities Review process via communication with Council Officers and Councillors respectively.

Further opportunity for community consultation and comment would be provided in any feasibility study process.

## **8. Conclusion**

Council received 23 written submissions during the Aquatic Facilities Review public comment period. Approximately 30 interested community members also attended a Public Forum that was hosted by Council during that period.

A range of viewpoints were expressed in the feedback received during the public comment period: some viewpoints were supportive of the recommendations contained within the Review, some were not. Council must now consider this feedback in the context of the Review's recommendations and determine a way forward.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

**That Council, having noted the feedback received from interested community members in regards to the Aquatic Facilities Review as well as the likely costs associated with a continued commitment to the operations of six (6) outdoor pools;**

- 1. Commission a feasibility study which examines an option to develop an indoor heated aquatic facility and an option to redevelop the existing Castlemaine Pool.**
- 2. Formally notify the Department of Planning and Community Development as to the resolution of Council in regard to the future of aquatic provision in the Shire, and seek the State Government's financial support for the feasibility study.**
- 3. Decommission the Campbells Creek Pool on a permanent basis, and**
  - a) engage in community consultations as to the nature of any reinvestment in community recreation infrastructure in Campbells Creek and to establish timeframes for such.**
  - b) Revoke the Instrument of Delegation pertaining to the Campbells Creek Swimming Pool Committee of Management, pursuant to Section 86 (3) of the Local Government Act.**
  - c) Write to all individual members of the Campbells Creek Swimming Pool Committee of Management thanking them for their significant contributions to the management of the Pool during their term of office.**
  - d) Receive a recommendation from the Campbells Creek Swimming Pool Committee of Management in relation to the distribution of any funds held by it at the time of the dissolution of its Instrument of Delegation.**
- 4. Decommission the Chewton Pool at the end of the 2008/2009 swimming season on a permanent basis.**

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5. Renew its commitment to the importance of the Chewton Soldiers Memorial Park and consult with stakeholders about the best use of funds allocated from the Department of Sustainability and Environment for the shared amenities facility development..
  6. Should a decision be made to develop a new indoor aquatic facility decommission the Castlemaine Pool on a permanent basis.
  7. Develop a detailed Asset Management Plan for the Harcourt, Maldon and Newstead Pools that is informed by the Technical Audit of those facilities that was undertaken in 2006.
  8. Continue to support the ongoing safe operations of the Harcourt, Maldon and Newstead Pools.
  9. Formally notify the Member for Bendigo West, The Honourable Bob Cameron, as to its resolutions in regards to the Mount Alexander Shire Aquatic Facilities Strategic Review.

**MOVED COUNCILLOR BARKLA**

**That Standing Orders be suspended to hear from the applicant and objectors.**

**SECONDED COUNCILLOR CROSS**

**CARRIED (at 8.39pm)**

- *Ms Joyce Sanders raised two questions:*
  - *The validity of the analysis of the 23 submissions, as the statistical analysis of the recommendations did not appear to be accurate.*
  - *Whether the funding would still be available for the Campbell's Creek and Castlemaine pools, if the projects relating to their refurbishment did not proceed.*
- *Director of Economic and Social Development advised that the statistical analysis was accurate, as the way in which the submissions were received did not enable a straight analytical result as the data had been qualitative rather than quantitative. In short, the submissions did not lend themselves to statistical analysis.*
- *The Mayor responded to the funding questions by advising that should the planned works (which were the basis for the funding grants received) not proceed, then the funding would have to be returned.*
- *Mr Robin Taylor supported the approach of a feasibility study approach to determine if the options were financially viable. Mr Taylor suggested that there was a potential to hold all decommissions in abeyance until the study was complete.*

**MOVED COUNCILLOR BARKLA**

**That Standing Orders be resumed.**

**SECONDED COUNCILLOR CROSS**

**CARRIED (at 8.50pm)**

**MOVED COUNCILLOR GITTUS**

**That the recommendation be adopted, subject to point 4 being replaced with:**

4. Continue to support the current operation of the Chewton Swimming Pool, subject to it being financially responsible to do so, until the opening of a major new, or major renewal of the municipal aquatic facility located in Castlemaine.

**SECONDED COUNCILLOR CROSS**

**CARRIED**