A photograph of a water play area at a swimming pool. In the center, a tall green pole has several colorful buckets (red, blue, yellow) hanging from it, with water pouring out. To the right, there are several large, colorful arches (blue, red, green, yellow) that children are playing under. Many children in swimwear are scattered throughout the area, some standing under water jets and others playing with the arches. The background shows a black metal fence and a brick building under a cloudy sky.

City of Amery Water Recreation Study

**Completed by:
David C. Chanski, MPA
Management Analyst
City of Amery**

**Sponsored by:
Amery Community Foundation**

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Executive Summary

The City of Amery is a lovely, rural town in northwest Wisconsin. The people of Amery are proud of their city and desire to see it grow and continue to attract visitors. There is only one problem. Many say that Amery suffers from a lack of recreational options, specifically water recreation options.

Commissioned by the City of Amery and the Amery Community Foundation, this study looks into this matter. Surveys were conducted on the residents of Amery and municipalities throughout Wisconsin. Additional research into this topic was also conducted.

Based on the results of the surveys and research, three recommendations for improving water recreation in Amery were developed:

- Conduct a swimmer's itch awareness campaign
- Clean-up, maintain, and improve the existing beaches in Amery
- Develop a 3 to 5 year plan to construct a pool and/or splash pad.

Studies have shown that improved water recreation with the City of Amery has the potential to improve the community as a whole socially, economically, and physically.

Introduction

A driving force behind the economic and social stability of any community is the presence of quality recreational options for members of the community and visitors alike to enjoy. Studies have also shown that the presence of a variety of recreation options within a community result in increased health and well-being. The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) puts it well:

Just as water, sewer, and public safety are considered essential public services, parks are vitally important to establishing and maintaining the quality of life in a community, ensuring the health of families and youth, and contributing to the economic and environmental well-being of a community and region.

There are no communities that pride themselves on their quality of life, promote themselves as a desirable location for businesses to relocate, or maintain that they are environmental stewards of their natural resources, without such communities having a robust, active system of parks and recreation programs for public use and enjoyment.¹

The City of Amery has many recreational options available to its residents and visitors including: 8 public parks, 2 public baseball fields, 2 public beaches, a municipal campground, skate park, tennis and pickle ball courts, and access to 3 lakes and the Apple River as well as the Cattail and Stower Seven Lakes trails. The residents and visitors of Amery are provided with many opportunities to bike, fish, camp, boat, skate, and much, much more.

Yet, even with the presence of 3 lakes (including two public beaches) and a river within city limits, one area of recreation that many within Amery feel is lacking is that of water recreation. Specifically, people want a nice place to cool off in the summer, teach their children and grandchildren to swim, exercise, and gather as a community.

This Water Recreation Study was commissioned by the City of Amery and the Amery Community Foundation. Its purpose is to survey the Amery community to assess their desire for increased water recreation options within Amery and then to assess the feasibility of implementing such options. It is the opinion of these two entities that now is the time to consider bringing additional water recreation options to Amery as the community looks to continue to attract employers (and thus a larger workforce), young families, and visitors to the City of Lakes.

The remainder of this study will present the types of water recreation considered in this study, the advantages to additional recreation options, an analysis of both a survey that was conducted on Amery residents as well as a survey that was conducted on Wisconsin

¹ National Recreation and Park Association, "Why Parks and Recreation are Essential Public Services"

municipalities, the financial considerations that must be made, and finally a recommendation for moving forward.

Water Recreation Options Considered

For the purpose of this study, three main types of water recreation were considered: pools, splash pads, and beach recreation. As this study is not an action plan for building a specific project, each type of recreation was considered for its financial feasibility and the community's interest in it.

There were no stipulations put on the size of pool or its amenities. As will be discussed later, surveys of both the Amery community as well as of municipalities throughout Wisconsin were conducted. The surveys did not specify "water park," "recreation center," etc. Respondents were just asked generically about a pool.

Splash pads can have a variety of names: spray parks, rain pads, spraygrounds, and splash zones. For the purpose of this study, they were referred to as splash pads. Splash pads are recreational areas for water play that have little to no standing water. Some advantages to splash pads are: the risk of drowning is essentially eliminated due to the lack of standing water, personnel costs are significantly lower as there is no need for an on-duty lifeguard, they are generally handicap accessible, and are very customizable.

As to beach recreation, that includes everything from plain beaches to floating docks, piers, volleyball courts, boat rentals, etc. While Amery does have two public beaches (one on North Twin Lake and one on South Twin Lake) as well as a floating dock, the resident survey inquired as to whether respondents would like more beach recreation options to be available.

Benefits to Recreation

Now, before an in-depth analysis of the aforementioned water recreation options is conducted and the results of the community and municipalities surveys are presented, time should be spent on laying the framework as to why the City of Amery should consider investing in additional recreational options.

Providing recreational can result in a variety of positive benefits to the community. These advantages range from economic to social to physical well-being. These benefits may be separate in nature, but, in the case of recreation, they are very much intertwined. It is not that one cannot survive without the others but that each supports the others.

Recreational facilities have been proven to energize the economic stability of communities. When recreational facilities are available, property values tend to increase not only for the properties adjacent to such facilities but also to properties throughout the community. This is a result of the increased desirability to live near such amenities. A recent Texas A&M study said,

The real estate market consistently demonstrates that many people are willing to pay a larger amount for property located close to parks and open space areas than for a home that does not offer this amenity.²

Increased property values result in increased tax base, which means more revenue for municipalities to spend on community improvements. The National Recreation and Park Association points out that recreational facilities also “provide significant indirect revenues to local and regional economies from sports tournaments and special events such as arts, music, and holiday festivals.” Finally, the more attractive a community is to live in, the more likely employers are to locate within that community, provide jobs to the residents of said community who, in return, spend their money within the community. The cycle goes on and on.

Socially, recreational facilities provide a community with places to gather and build a sense of comradery and community pride. They give people a place to play, relax, and commune with their neighbors regardless of one’s age, sex, race, ideology, or economic standing. Additionally, studies have shown a strong association between the availability of recreational facilities and a reduction in crime and juvenile delinquency. For those from outside of the community looking in, the presence of recreational facilities and the use thereof is also a positive reflection on the quality of life within that community.

Finally, the availability of recreational facilities has been proven to improve the overall health and well-being of a community. Recreational facilities encourage people to get off the couch, get away from the TV screen, and to put their phones down. Be it a public park, pool, or baseball field, such facilities provide cost effective ways for people to improve their physical and mental health. According to studies by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the presence of recreational facilities has been shown to result in a 25 percent increase of residents who exercise at least three times per week.

Speaking at the 2003 NRPA Congress and Exposition, then United States Surgeon General Vice Admiral Richard Carmona said, “We now know that physical activity – whether hiking, swimming, dancing, or simply walking – can actually reduce feelings of depression, anxiety and stress. And, of course, physical activity is a key element in helping us maintain a healthy weight and improving cardiovascular functioning. More than ever before, we need the opportunities for physical exercise [public entities] help to provide.”

While public recreational facilities may not always provide immediately tangible financial benefits, the variety of benefits discussed above demonstrates how they do, in fact, have extensive indirect benefits to a community.

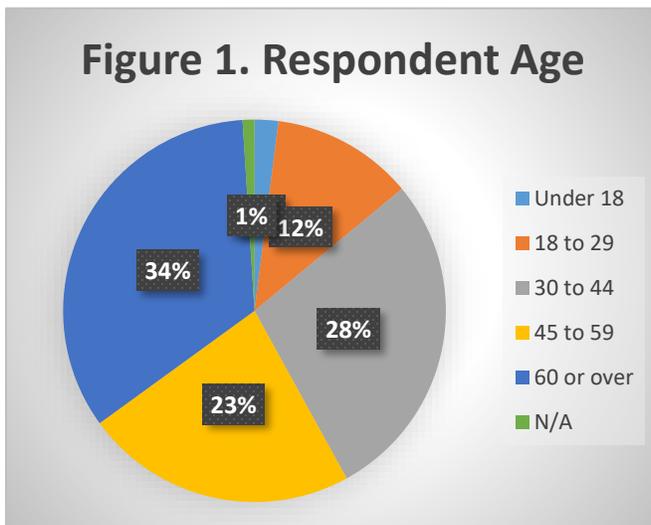
² National Recreation and Park Association, “Why Parks and Recreation are Essential Public Services”

The Amery Water Recreation Survey

A significant aspect of this study was to “take the temperature” of the Amery community as to their desire for additional water recreation options. The Amery Water Recreation Survey was 10 questions in length and ask respondents a variety of questions from whether the respondent lives within city limits to what kind of water recreation they would like to see developed in Amery to how much they would pay to use such facilities.

The survey was distributed through the 1st Quarter 2017 utility bills (mailed Friday, April 14) and were received at City Hall until Thursday, May 31. Additionally, hard copies of the survey could be picked up by visitors to City Hall, and a link to an online version of the survey was published on the City’s website. The online survey was hosted by SurveyMonkey.

435 surveys were completed. Of that number, 235 hard copies were returned to City Hall, and 200 surveys were completed online. 83 percent (360) of all respondents identified as living within Amery city limits. The population of the City of Amery, as estimated in 2016 by the Wisconsin Department of Administration, is 2,918, and 1,237 utility bills were sent out for the 1st Quarter of 2017. Thus, respondents represented 12.3% of the total Amery population and 29.1% of utility bill recipients.



In addition to being asked whether or not they were residents of Amery, participants were asked to identify their age bracket. The plurality of respondents (34%) identified in the “60 or over” age bracket. This is on par with the data from the 2015 American Community Survey, which estimated 36.2% of all Amery residents as in the “60 or over” bracket. As Figure 1 shows, it is important to note, however, that 51% of respondents identified as being between 30-years-old and 59-years-old. This is important, as it is people in this

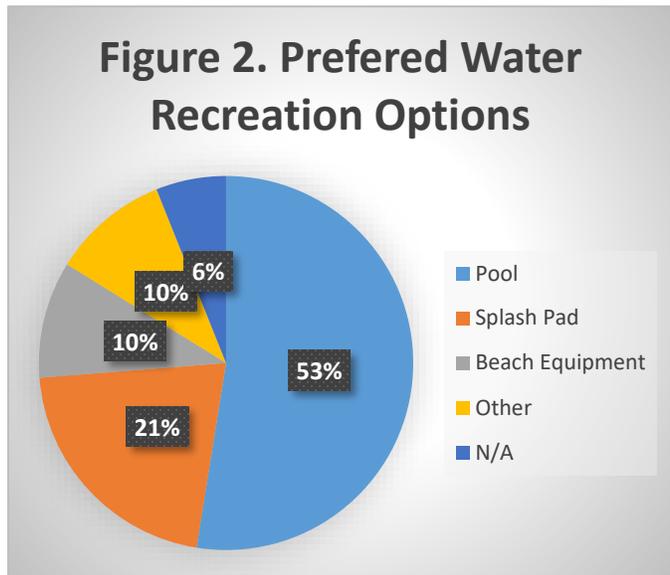
group who tend to have children who use the City’s recreational facilities.

As stated before, the heart of this study is to assess the Amery community’s desire for additional water recreation options. As such, the third question survey participants were asked was “What kind of water recreation options would you like?” (Figure 2). Options provided were: pool, splash pad, beach equipment, and “other,” which was accompanied by a space to make a comment.

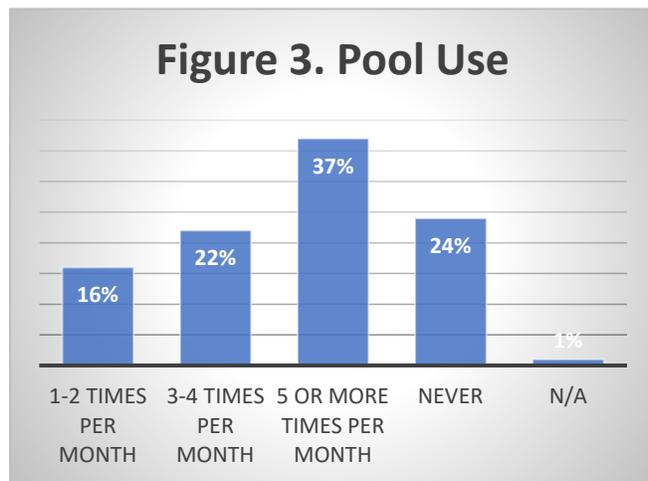
“Pool” was selected by a majority of respondents (53%). “Splash pad” followed at 21% and “beach equipment” and “other” at 10% each. 6 percent of respondents did not answer the question. Of those who responded “other,” the vast majority used it as an opportunity to state

how they do not want a pool or splash pad. Many stated that there is already access available to three lakes and a river, all within City limits, and residents should just use those. Finally, it is important to recognize that respondents were given the opportunity to “select all that apply.” Therefore, many respondents selected more than one option.

It is not only important to know if the Amery community wants to pool, but also equally important to know if they would actually use it. Not only did a plurality of respondents (37%) state that they would use a public pool at least 5 times per month, 59% said they would use it more than twice, and a full 75% said they would use it at least once per month (Figure 3).



Interestingly, while less than 6% of respondents made the comment that they do not support a pool in Amery, almost a full 25% stated that they would not use a pool if it were built. A



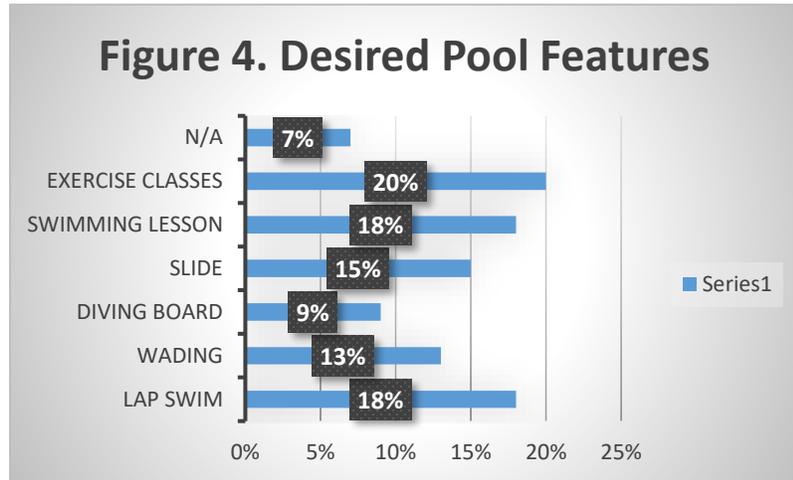
possible explanation for this can be found in the comments section that was provided to survey participants. Some who were in support of building a pool commented that, while they would not personally use it, they saw the benefit one would have to the community, and/or they wanted one for their visiting family and friends to use.

Another survey question inquired as to whether participants would use a splash pad. Unlike a pool, only 34% of respondents said that they would use a splash pad while

41% said they would not. The disparity here can be attributed to the fact that splash pads are, in general, marketed toward young children, especially those who cannot swim as there is no standing water. And because Amery does have an older age demographic, it is not surprising that the plurality of respondents said they would not use it.

It is important to note that 20% of respondents did say that they were unsure as to whether or not they would use a splash pad. This can be attributed to the lack of knowledge about splash pads. Some respondents even mentioned in their surveys that they did not know what a splash pad was.

Now, pools come in all shapes and sizes with a variety of different features and amenities. Participants were provided with a list of six different features and amenities from a diving board to swimming lessons (Figure 4). Respondents were given the option to “check at that apply.”

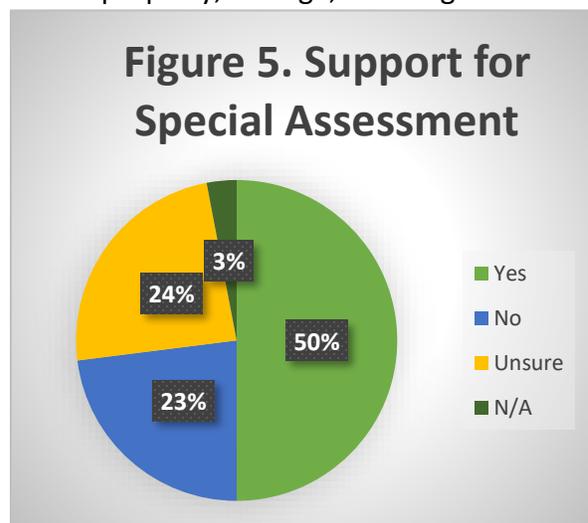


“Exercise classes” was the number one feature/amenity selected (20%). “Swimming lessons” and “lap swim” followed shortly thereafter at 18% each. Interestingly, actual pool features such as a diving board and slide were the two least selected at 9% and 15% respectively. 7 percent of participants did not answer the question.

The results of this question seem to paint the picture that the residents of Amery do not just want a pool as a place to hangout. They want it has a place where they can exercise and have their children learn to swim. Going back to the advantages section of this report, they understand how a pool can increase health and well-being within the community, and they do not want to travel a long distance to access such an amenity.

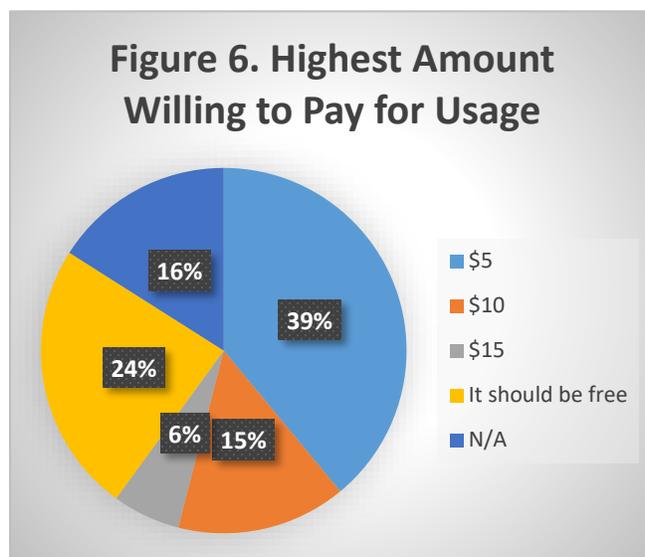
As with any service that the City provides, there is a cost, and as a municipality, those costs are ultimately placed on the taxpayers. As such, survey participants were asked whether they would support a special assessment to fund the construction of a pool (Figure 5). A special assessment as a tax that is placed on a person’s property taxes to, generally, support a specific project. A special assessment can be small, being placed on a single property owner to (for example) fund utilities being extended onto that person’s property, or large, covering all the property owners within the community to (as in this study) fund the construction of a community pool.

Almost 50% of respondents identified as being in support of a special assessment (49.89% to be exact) with only 23% being opposed. However, it is important to note that 24% of respondents identified as being “unsure” whether they would support a special assessment. Here, some respondents also mentioned that they were “unsure” because they do not know what a special assessment it. However, even if all the



“unsure” respondents as well as the 3% who did not answer the question were to flip to their answers to “no,” it would still be almost an exact 50/50 split between those in favor of a special assessment and those against it.

Funding construction of a pool or splash pad is only one financial aspect of such a venture. It must also be operated and maintained. Because of this, survey participants were also asked how much they would be willing to pay for use of a pool (Figure 6). Given the option between “\$5,” “\$10,” “15,” and “It should be free,” 60% of respondents stated that they would be willing to pay to use a pool. 39 percent identified that the most they would be willing to pay would be \$5 with 15% selecting \$10 and 6% selecting \$15. Finally, 24% believe that access to a public pool should be free, and 16% of respondents did not answer the question, much of which can be attributed to respondents discussing payment in the comments section of the survey.



The final part of the survey was an “any other comments” section. Of the 435 surveys completed, 191 respondents (43.9%) left comments. Comments varied in length and in topic. The vast majority of comments could be placed into one of four categories, however: support for a pool, support against a pool, fee schedule, and swimmer’s itch.

Comments for and against a pool were the two most prevalent type of comments. For those against a pool, many stated either taxes in Amery are already high and a pool

will make them only higher or that there are already three lakes and a river in town, so a pool is a waste of money. Many of the comments in favor of a pool went the social and well-being route, stating that a place for people to take swimming lessons, have low-impact exercise, or engage in the community in necessary. Others went the economic route, stating that Amery cannot and will not grow economically nor be able to attract younger families if a pool is not built.

Some comments addressed the immediately previous question regarding a fee to use a pool. These comments asked if there would be or mentioned that there should be a fee schedule for pool usage, including resident and non-resident rates, seasonal/annual passes, family passes, etc.

Swimmer’s itch was the final major topic about which survey participant commented.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), swimmer’s itch is “a skin rash caused by a parasite (shistosomes) which ordinarily infects birds, semi-aquatic mammals, and snails.” These parasites have the ability to penetrate the skin. While the parasites will die

should they penetrate the skin, they can cause an allergic reaction in some people. This reaction is called “swimmer’s itch.” Symptoms of swimmer’s itch are an initial tingling sensation, which results in larger spots of irritation at the point of penetration and can last for several days. Swimmer’s itch is usually contracted in shallow bodies of water where parasites may be present as a result of infected water fowl or snails.

Unfortunately, there is not treatment for eliminating swimmer’s itch causing parasites according to the DNR. However, there are some strategies that swimmers can use to avoid contracting it. First and foremost, the DNR recommends toweling off immediately after leaving the water as air drying is more likely to allow parasites to penetrate the skin and cause a reaction. Also, swim away from shore as parasites are less likely to be present in deep water. Finally, applying sunscreen that contains 0.1% to 1% piclosamide can be effective at repelling parasites.

The Municipalities Survey

To fully understand all the aspects that must be considered when constructing a public facility such as a pool, a survey of municipalities in Wisconsin who operate public pools was conducted.

This survey was distributed online through the Peer Assistance Resource Center (PARC) that is available to members of the Wisconsin City/County Management Association (WCMA) through the WCMA website. The survey contained eleven questions and received nine responses. The City of Barron (a tenth response) was contacted directly via email and answered the same questions.

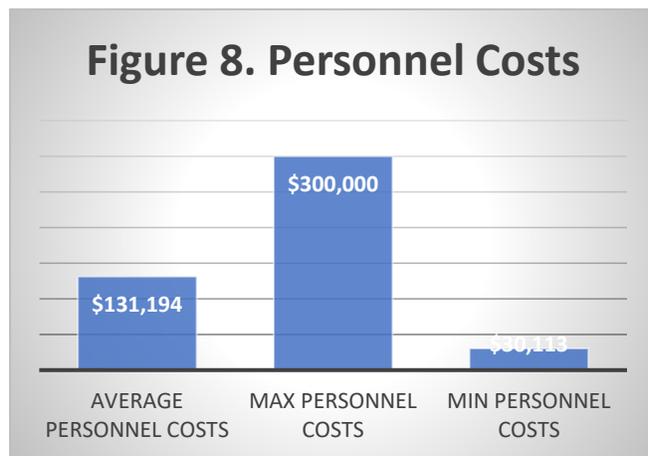
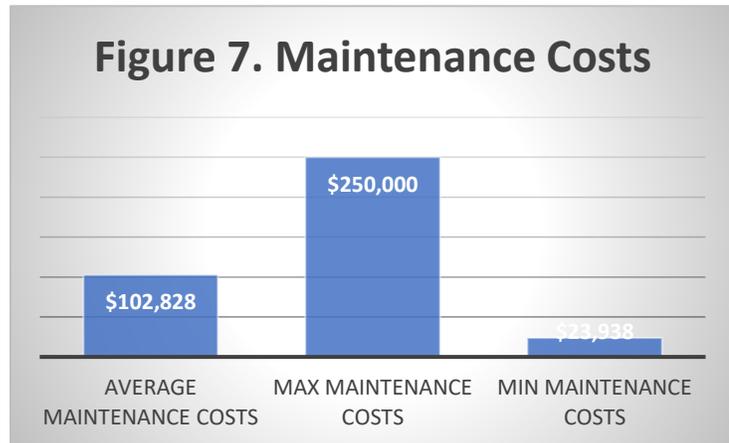
Responding municipalities ranged in population from just under 1,500 to over 65,000. All communities had either a municipal pool or splash pad. Of the ten municipalities, only three operated indoor facilities. Additionally only three municipalities had facilities that were built prior to the year 2000.

Just as the responding municipalities varied in population, so do the pools vary in size and amenities. Large pools such as the City of Oshkosh (population 66,579) municipal pool are full water parks with water slides, a lazy river, lap swim, wading area, and splash pad. Other pools, however, were much smaller with basic amenities such as the City of Hillsboro (population 1,417), which consists of a multi-lane lap swim pool with two diving boards, rest rooms, and concessions stand.

All but two facilities were financed solely by the responding municipalities. Municipalities used a variety of methods for financing construction of their facilities. All the municipalities funded construction, at least in part, through their tax levy as a regular capital expenditure or borrowed the funds and placed it on their debt levy. Some municipalities reduced the financial burden on their tax levy by applying for grants, running fundraising campaigns, and collaborating with other entities. Two municipalities coordinated construction and operation of their facilities with the local school district.

Participating municipalities were also asked how much their pool cost to construct. Of the 10 responses, only two municipalities indicated that their pool cost less than \$100,000 to construct. And in both of these cases, the pools are smaller than the others, have less amenities, and, most significantly, were built over 30 years ago. The time factor is important. For example, when you take inflation into account, \$100,000 in 1987 has the purchasing power of \$218,490.50 in 2017. The actual cost of each pool is unknown, however. The question was ill informed and limited respondents to a highest range of “\$100,000 or more.”

There are more costs related to a pool or splash pad other than initial construction. Primarily, there are maintenance costs and personnel costs. Maintenance costs varied based both the size and age of the pool. Large pools were logically had higher maintenance costs as there is just more to fix and older pools had higher maintenance costs as equipment gets old and needs to be replaced. The highest reported annual maintenance costs were \$250,000, which was a larger pool that is over 20 years old (Figure 7). The lowest annual maintenance costs were \$23,938, which belonged to arguably the smallest pool. The City of Portage reported their maintenance costs for their splash pad to be \$9,875 in 2017.



Pools must also be operated by maintenance personnel and lifeguards. On average, personnel costs were higher than maintenance costs. The highest annual personnel costs were \$300,000, and the lowest were \$30,113 (Figure 8). Incidentally, the pool with the highest personnel costs was the pool with the highest maintenance costs, and the pool with the lowest personnel costs was the pool with the lowest maintenance costs. As

splash pads do not have standing water, the communities with splash pads listed no personnel costs directly associated with them.

To help fund the operation of their pools, all but one of the participating municipalities have an admission fee to use their pools. Three municipalities charge less than \$5 for single admission, one charges between \$5 and \$9, and one municipality charges between \$10 and \$15 for single admission. Three communities did not provide a cost for single admission. Two communities

with splash pads listed having no admission fee (the third did not provide an answer). It is common that communities do not charge for splash pad admission, as they are usually features of a public park or open space.

In addition to single admission fees, every municipality that operates a pool has a fee schedule with a combination of seasonal, annual, resident, non-resident, single, family, and group passes. Such passes make use of a pool more financially viable and attractive to those who are likely to use it on a regular basis, especially families with multiple swimmers.

Participants were also asked what kind of challenges they have faced over the lifetime of their pool. Some municipalities mentioned the safety aspect and its effect on the municipalities' insurance rates as well as the issue of the pool becoming a form of daycare and (in the case of outdoor pools) people jumping the fence (usually teens) and using the pool outside of operational hours.

The most common challenges municipalities faced, however, were staffing and maintenance costs. Almost every industry is facing a workforce shortage and recreation is no exception. Pools are, generally, limited by a couple factors: they are usually only seasonal or part-time employers and require their employees to have special training (be a strong swimmer and be certified in CPR at a minimum). Additionally, they generally attract young adults (especially high schoolers) to be lifeguards, and it is this same group that almost every other seasonal or part-time employer is also trying to recruit. One municipality reported that they contract with the local school district to provide and train their lifeguards, who are more than likely high school students.

As demonstrated in a previous question, maintenance is also a large challenge when operating a pool, particularly as a pool ages. Outdoor pools face the effects of the Midwest weather extremes, and indoor pools face the challenge of having the additional costs of a full building and expensive dehumidifying units.

Finally, participants were asked whether there are other entities within their communities that have a pool that is open to the public. Five of the ten respondents listed that there were. Two mentioned a school, three mentioned a hotel, one mentioned a YMCA, and one mentioned a hospital. The only community that made mention to the other entity infringing on the municipality's pool was the one with the hospital pool. That community operates a small pool and splash pad and is having a difficult time competing since the local hospital opened an Olympic size swimming pool.

Considerations

Now, before we jump right in to the recommendations regarding water recreation, let's recap a few important considerations. Four considerations can be drawn out from our review of the benefits of recreation, the Amery Water Recreation Survey, the Municipalities Survey.

First, the cost of constructing such a facility must be considered. Beyond the pool itself, fencing must be built, a bathroom and changing facility must be constructed, chosen pool amenities installed (slide, diving board, deck chairs, concessions, etc.), and, of course, a site for the facility must be chosen and paid for if not already owned. Based off the responses from the Municipalities Survey and other research, it is my estimate the a reasonable sized pool that can accommodate lap swimming, swimming lessons, exercise classes, and fun amenities like a slide in addition to the other aforementioned features would cost at least \$500,000 to construct. Build an indoor pool, and that number can be doubled if not tripled. For example, an indoor pool (with all its amenities) like that located at The Centre in New Richmond, WI would likely cost over \$2.5 million to construct, per The Center's Executive Director.

The second consideration is, as mentioned multiple times before, maintenance costs. While some maintenance costs would be covered by equipment warranties for the first couple of years, costs would likely steadily rise as the pool aged and suffered from weather exposure (assuming an outdoor pool was built). Assuming a pool similar to the size of those operated by communities similar in size to Amery is built, the City can expect to spend at least \$25,000 to \$40,000 per year on maintenance.

The third consideration is personnel. A pool must have lifeguards present during all hours of operation. Those lifeguards must also be trained. Again, based on communities similar in size to Amery, the City can expect to spend at least \$30,000 to \$50,000 per year on personnel.

The final consideration is to balance the previous three. Taking into account the cost to build, maintain, and operate a pool, do those costs outweigh the benefits a pool would bring to the community? Would a community pool boost community identity, increase health and well-being, and attract others to Amery? If a reasonably sized pool would do those things, then the construction of such a facility should be strongly considered.

Recommendations

Having completed this Water Recreation Study, there are three main recommendations to the Amery City Council. These recommendations range from immediate with minimal cost to long-term with a high cost. These recommendations are not the only avenues the City can take but, again, are *recommendations* for moving forward.

The first recommendation is to conduct a swimmer's itch awareness campaign. As discussed at the beginning of this report, swimmer's itch is a real issue in most inland waters in Wisconsin. And, just from the comments made in the Amery Water Recreation Survey, it is clear that it is an issue in Amery waters as well. An awareness campaign that informs users of Amery's lakes and the Apple River as to the strategies for avoiding swimmers it should encourage more people to make more use of the water recreation resources already available to them. This would be a low cost recommendation as the only financial burden would be employees' time and any resources (paper, signs, flyers, etc.) used to spread awareness.

The second recommendation is to make a real effort to clean-up and improve Amery's recreational beaches and consider developing new beaches. This includes keeping the beaches clear of garbage, animal feces, and weeds while installing and maintaining beach recreation features such as floating docks (remember swimming away from shore is a strategy against swimmer's itch), volleyball courts, picnic areas, and water faucets for rinsing off (rinsing off shortly after exiting the water is another strategy against swimmer's itch). The City should even consider investing in paddleboat, canoe, and kayak rentals for beach users.

While this recommendation is more costly than the first, it continues to make use of the resources already available. In fact, this recommendation should be paired with the first for maximum effectiveness.

The final recommendation is to develop a 3 to 5 year plan to construct a pool and/or splash pad. While the first two recommendations should encourage people to make better use of the resources already available to them, the benefits outlined in the beginning of this report demonstrate how important a central facility like a pool is to a community. It stands out to people from outside the community. It, again, provides a central location for people to gather and commune as neighbors. Pools are also much cleaner than lake or river water, and most people find them more enjoyable to swim. If the Amery community truly desire to grow, attract younger families, and encourage businesses to relocate in Amery, a community facility like a pool is a step in the right direction.

Conclusion

Based upon the results of this study, the City of Amery should strongly consider developing more water recreation options while making its current options more enticing. Primarily, the City should consider building a community pool and/or splash pad while improving and upgrading its beaches.

While such a project will not be cheap, it is in my opinion that the benefits to the community as a whole outweigh the cons (mainly the cost). When considering relocating to a community, people consider what amenities are available to them. When a business considers whether they should locate themselves in a community, they want to know if that community will be a benefit for attracting quality employees. And for those choosing to visit a community over another, they do so because that community offers more amenities than another.

The benefits of additional recreation options (and in this case water recreation options) is would be beneficial to the community socially, economically, and physically.