



## AQUATICS COMMITTEE

Arlington, VA



December 20, 2019

Christian Dorsey, Chair  
Arlington County Board  
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 300  
Arlington, VA 22201

Tannia Talento, Chair  
Arlington School Board  
2110 Washington Blvd., 2nd Floor  
Arlington, VA 22204

RE: FY 2021 Proposed Budget & FY 2021-30 Capital Improvement Plan

Dear Chair Dorsey and Chair Talento,

I am writing on behalf of the Aquatics Committee<sup>1</sup> (AC) to request support for our recommendations for parity of tax support and user fees to access Arlington public swimming pools within the FY 2021 budget, and for addressing the worsening capacity shortfall at our pools within the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). We request that you share these recommendations with the County Manager and Arlington Public Schools (APS) Interim Superintendent before the release of their FY 2021 budget and CIP proposals. FY 2021 is a significant year for aquatics with the opening of the new aquatics facility at Long Bridge Park (LBP) and with the opportunity to include funding in the CIP for a pool at the Career Center to avert looming aquatic capacity issues facing students and nearby community swimmers.

- FY 2021 Budget – Tax Support & User Fee Parity

Among the responsibilities delegated to the AC in its Charter is a directive to make recommendations on fees charged for the use of the pools. Over the last two years, the AC has identified disparities in the way pool patrons are assessed user fees and, last year, proposed recommendations for fee parity that would have reduced the current level of tax support to operate and maintain (O&M) our pools. Although some adjustments were made in the FY 2020 budget, parity has yet to be achieved.

By way of background, community users constitute the largest user group of the pools – 72%.<sup>2</sup> There are two subgroups within this universe – “Drop-in” swimmers<sup>3</sup> and DPR class/team participants. Drop-in swimmer fees cover 94% of O&M costs attributed to them, while DPR participant fees cover only 16%. This discrepancy is at odds with the County’s “Cost Recovery Pyramid”<sup>4</sup> for recreational and sport activities which recommends that fees for “Drop-in” programs recover no more than 30% of costs, while

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<sup>1</sup> The Aquatics Committee is a joint committee of the Arlington County Sports Commission and the Arlington Public Schools. The Committee is charged with ensuring community engagement in the operation and use of the Arlington indoor swimming pools located within the three high schools and with making recommendations on behalf of users to the County Board, through the Sports Commission, and to the School Board as needed.

<sup>2</sup> Other pool user groups include APS and renters.

<sup>3</sup> Drop-in swimmers include single-entry patrons and those who purchase multi-swim memberships or passes.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Parks & Recreation, 2017.

fees for programs that mostly benefit individuals, such as classes and sports teams, recover at least 85% of costs. Additionally, APS tax support is tapped to cover 51% of the remaining community use O&M costs.

We do not believe that scarce APS funds should be allocated to pay for community use of our public pools. We do believe, however, that all community users should pay O&M fees based on the same fee scale. In support of these recommendations, the School Board issued FY 2021 Budget Guidance directing the Interim Superintendent to "... collaborat[e] with the County on ... service fees [and to] explore increases in revenue, including a review of all APS fees."<sup>5</sup> In fulfilling these tasks, the Interim Superintendent is to "consider recommendations from 2018-19 advisory council reports." Likewise, County Board Chair Christian Dorsey noted that,

Arlington Public Schools fees are outside of the purview of DPR and the County Board. County staff do consult with APS staff on fee-setting, but the operational determination of what fees to charge, and for how much, is one made by APS staff and recommended for approval by the School Board.<sup>6</sup>

Although progress on these issues was made in the FY 2020 budget, we ask that the FY 2021 budget be the vehicle to finish the tasks of ensuring parity in the O&M fees paid by community users of Arlington's public pools, relieving APS of the tax support contribution it has made to support community pool use, and ensuring that the percent of tax support provided by the County to APS for community use of its pools be no less than the percent of tax support that will be provided to cover O&M costs attributed to the LBP aquatics facilities.<sup>7</sup>

- FY 2021-30 CIP – Aquatic Facility Capacity Issues

The AC Charter also tasks the Committee to make recommendations on "the need for additional ... aquatic facilities." At this time, APS is facing a tipping point in terms of available pool space and time to serve that instructional needs of students without reducing community access to Arlington's school-based pools due to growing enrollment.<sup>8</sup>

To understand the importance of providing necessary water safety swimming instruction to Arlington youth, drowning is the leading cause of death in U.S. children ages 1 to 4, and the second leading cause between ages 5 to 9. Among all school-age children (5-19), it is the third-leading cause of unintentional injury deaths. In Arlington, over 60% of students are non-safe swimmers before they begin instruction.

The APS Water Safety and Lifetime Fitness Program<sup>9</sup> (Program) that is offered to elementary and high school students is an integral part of the corresponding Health & Physical Education Curricula. Once learned, swimming is a lifetime endeavor and the one sport that could save your life. Yet, Program

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<sup>5</sup> FY 2021 School Board Budget Guidance adopted 3 OCT 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Email sent 25 JUN 2019.

<sup>7</sup> As a benchmark, the County's transfer to APS for O&M costs attributed to community swimmers at neighborhood pools in FY 2019 is projected to be 24.5%.

<sup>8</sup> Such reduction assumes that the structure of APS's instructional Program will not be adversely modified. Community assess most at risk of cutbacks would be "midday" swim, heavily used by older or physically-challenged swimmers, and/or "zero" hour swim, which would cut into the swim time allotted to "early-bird" swimmers.

<sup>9</sup> The Program at the elementary level provides each 3rd or 4th grader one hour of instruction for five consecutive school days. At the high school level, the Program provides each 9th and 10th graders at least one three-week PE

scheduling is so tight that, given growing student enrollment, there will not be enough slots to accommodate the Program for 3<sup>rd</sup>- and 4<sup>th</sup>-graders when Reed Elementary School opens.

At the elementary level, pool use is scheduled by school – once during the fall semester for 4th graders and once during the spring semester for 3rd graders. Each school is slotted for at least two 1-hour sessions for each day that they are scheduled. Depending on the number of enrolled students, some schools require multiple slots because safety considerations and pool space limitations cap class size to 40 students per session. Adding to scheduling pressures, “non-safe swimmers” require instruction in shallow water areas of the pools. For elementary students, this means the smaller-capacity instructional pools. Finally, at the elementary level, classes are generally scheduled between 9:30 am-12:00 pm, due to transportation limitations, early-release days, and competing uses of the pool by high school students and the community.

At the high school level, classes (up to 35 students/class) are held occurs throughout the school day (8:00 am – 3:10 pm), including overlaps with morning elementary groups. In terms of capacity, the number of students participating in these two curriculum programs is raising commensurate with the growth in total enrollment. This growth, from the time our new high school-based pools opened in FY 2014 through the end of the current CIP, will more than double and is a high-level way to illustrate that we may no longer have the capacity to provide the existing Program to our students.

In short, based on the information provided the Aquatics Committee, we think that our existing pools are reaching a tipping point in programming capacity, and that, at the current growth rate in student enrollment, a fourth APS school pool will be warranted as early as School Year 2022-2023. We believe that, otherwise, APS’s ability to provide water safety instruction to elementary and high school students at the current level of instruction is in jeopardy. To address the looming pool capacity, the AC adopted the following position, which we urge you to support,

Arlington Aquatics Committee supports an aquatic facility within any High School with 1,200 or more students that can provide an equivalent aquatics curriculum as is currently administered by Arlington Public Schools.

Building a public pool is a generational decision. In this regard, special attention should be given to re-enforce the need for a 4<sup>th</sup> pool at the Career Center site from an equity perspective. The Career Center site is located in one of the “access gap hotspots” identified in the *Public Spaces Master Plan (PSMP)* where the population in that area has limited access to recreation and sport facilities.<sup>10</sup> Aquatics centers have been included within the footprint of all Arlington neighborhood high schools. While the Career Center is slated to be an “choice” school, it is being planned with the option to convert to a neighborhood school in the future. Meanwhile, APS plans to eventually serve 2,800 students at this site<sup>11</sup>, comparable to the number to be enrolled at Washington-Liberty High School when the new “Ed Center” annex is complete. Even though students at choice schools are offered the option to return to their neighborhood schools to participate in APS sports that are not offered onsite, the pools at home schools are not being expanded. Thus, making room for choice-school students at home schools

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unit of 8 to 10 hours in the pool. Additional PE swim units (the number may vary per school) are available for students who choose extra aquatic instruction.

<sup>10</sup> PSMP, 25 APR 2019, page 195.

<sup>11</sup> Career Center BLPC/PFRC Presentation, 3 DEC 2019, slide 15, cites a student enrollment capacity of 2,857.

degrades opportunities to participate for all students. More importantly, the *Destination 2027 Report*<sup>12</sup> shows that where you live in Arlington is an indication of your overall health, and that those living in proximity to the Career Center site are currently at risk of poorer health and lower life expectancy as compared to areas surrounding other existing high school pools.

We support the County Board's equity resolution and the School Board for including equity as a core value. We also commend the School Board for priorities it has articulated in its FY 2021-30 CIP directive to eliminate opportunity gaps and address capacity issues created by growing enrollment. You have an opportunity to jointly step up and include funding from both County and APS sources for a 4<sup>th</sup> high school pool within the footprint of the new Career Center high school in the in the CIP.<sup>13</sup> Including a pool in the plans for the Career Center school at this time will undoubtedly save future construction costs as opposed to attempts to retrofit a pool in the future. It will relieve the pressure on APS to continue uninterrupted its life-saving instructional program for our youth, and, for some of the County's most underserved population, it will be a valued asset for surrounding neighborhoods with few other aquatic options.

- Conclusion

Our priorities are to level the disparity in pool access fees paid by various community users, to ensure that space is set-aside for a pool facility that meets APS educational specs at the Career Center, and to oppose efforts to eliminate aquatic opportunities in Arlington. Our recommendations will enhance the safety and well-being of some of our most at-risk populations and level the field for user fees by ensuring the all community users pay their fair share of O&M costs. We look forward to working with the Boards toward achieving these objectives.

Thank you for your consideration of the Committee's recommendations.

Respectfully,

*Cynthia Hilton*

Cynthia Hilton  
Chair, Aquatics Committee

cc: Members of the Arlington County Board  
Members of the Arlington School Board  
Mark Schwartz, County Manager  
Cintia Johnson, Interim Superintendent  
Jane Rudolph, Director, Department of Parks & Recreation  
John Chadwick, Assistant Superintendent, Facilities and Operations

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<sup>12</sup> *Destination 2027 – Arlington's Plan for Achieving Health Equity by 2027*, April 2019.

<sup>13</sup> As noted above, community use of our school-based pools exceeds that of APS usage. The PSMP recommends that the County "work with Arlington Public Schools to maximize availability and stewardship of public spaces [and] ensure [that] the contributions to capital costs and maintenance of public spaces on County and APS sites are commensurate with use." PSMP, op. cit., pages 112-113.