

City of Salem,

I urge the City of Salem to find room in its budget to continue the operation of the Olinger and Walker pools beyond the end of September. Closing the pools will place hardships on the children of Salem and have a negative impact the quality of life in our community. There are many reasons to keep pool operation as a priority in the budget.

First, and at the risk of hyperbole, this truly could be a matter of life or death. Salem is a city on a river, near the ocean, and surrounded by lakes, rivers and streams. Learning to swim is not mere fun - it is a necessary safety skill for all community members, especially children. Salem has woefully few community pools. If children have parents who can afford the Courthouse or a private pool such as Salem Swim and Tennis, they will learn to swim. What about the rest of our children?

Second, the news is full of the national epidemic of obesity in children and Salem is no exception. Swimming is universally recommended as one of the best forms of exercise, one in which anyone can participate lifelong - but only if there is a community pool available. Will this opportunity be available solely to those who can afford private facilities?

Third, the decision to close the City's only public pools impacts not only young children learning to swim, but also Salem's middle- and high-school students. In September, Walker Middle School uses Walker Pool to teach swimming to its students, providing a physical education opportunity outside the school's already-overcrowded gyms and playing fields.

Without Walker and Olinger pools, West Salem High School and other high school aquatics programs will have no public pool facilities available to them. How can a school district operate an aquatics program without any pools? Again, those students whose parents can afford it may be able to swim on private club teams. But that is an opportunity for a limited few, and it is not the same experience for a student as representing his or her high school in interscholastic competition. Further, the high school aquatics program is one in which any student can participate, skill level notwithstanding. If a student isn't a top swimmer, he or she is not cut from the team, but instead swims at the JV level and improves. What a great opportunity for kids to develop skills, build self-confidence, and stay fit! Eliminating Salem's only public pools eliminates these crucial programs from our schools.

The new Boys and Girls Club facility is located adjacent to Walker Middle School, but if Walker Pool closes, there will no public pool available for after-school programs. As we all know, the summer months in Salem begin in July and end in October. Wouldn't it be great for the kids the Boys and Girls Club is serving to have an alternative to the Willamette River on a hot September afternoon?

Finally, the quality of a community is measured by the quality of life it offers to its citizens. The availability of public pools - pools open to all - is an important component of the recreational facilities offered by most cities to their residents. When companies consider locating a facility in a community, they consider the availability and quality of such facilities for their employees. Public pools are at the core of the recreational opportunities offered by many other - and much smaller - Oregon cities than Salem. Let's not fall further behind - please make pool operation a priority in the City's budget.

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