



# Aquatic Master Plan Task Force Report

NOVEMBER 2017

# City of Austin Aquatic Master Plan Task Force Report

## Task Force Members:

*Jane Rivera, PARB Chair*

*Rich DePalma, PARB Vice Chair*

*Dawn Lewis, Task Force Vice Chair*

*Rick Cofer, Task Force Chair*

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## INTRODUCTION

As directed by Austin City Council Resolution No. 20170817-052, the City of Austin Aquatic Master Plan Task Force consists of four members of the Parks and Recreation Board selected by the Parks and Recreation Board membership. On August 22, 2017, Board Chair Jane Rivera, Board Vice Chair Rich DePalma, Board Member Rick Cofer, and Board Member Dawn Lewis were unanimously appointed by the Parks and Recreation Board to serve on the Task Force. On September 26, 2017, the Task Force unanimously voted Board Member Rick Cofer as Task Force Chair and Board Member Dawn Lewis as Task Force Vice Chair.

The City Council formed the Task Force to:

- 1. Conduct public meetings and solicit additional public feedback on the draft planning tool known as the Draft Aquatic Master Plan (Plan).**

*Action Taken by Task Force:*

The Task Force held six public meetings at five different locations, which included citizen communication and input and one formal Community Public Input event. The Task Force held public meetings on September 10, 2017, September 19, 2017, September 26, 2017, October 16, 2017, November 14, 2017, and November 29, 2017. Additionally, the Parks and Recreation Department organized a community input event to collect information and feedback regarding the Aquatic Master Plan on October 23, 2017 at the Gus Garcia Recreation Center. All Task Force members attended this event.

*Information on meetings held and public feedback collected are attached in Appendix A.*

- 2. Review the Draft Aquatic Master Plan with consideration for the existing criteria related to:**
  - Geographic equity and access,
  - Environmental sustainability,
  - Fiscal sustainability,

- Historical and cultural importance,
- Popularity,
- Residential density and future population projections,
- Access to aquatics, and
- Creative funding sources and partnership opportunities.

*Action Taken by Task Force:*

Information was reviewed and considered.

*Additional information reviewed outside of the Draft Aquatic Master Plan is attached in Appendix B.*

**3. Provide policy guidance on:**

- A. How to prioritize investments,
- B. Possible pool closures,
- C. Building new aquatics facilities, and
- D. Recommendations for potential system funding level options for the 2018 Bond.

*Action Taken by Task Force:*

*Policy guidance is provided in the subsequent pages.*

The Task Force thanks the professional staff of the City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department, the Aquatic Advisory Board, and the Austin public for the breadth and depth of the work detailed in the Draft Aquatic Master Plan. We support the recommendations made with the modifications noted in our report. Our recommendations are presented to each of the elements in our charge from the City Council.

**A. POLICY GUIDANCE ON HOW TO PRIORITIZE INVESTMENTS**

*Investment, Not Disinvestment, in City of Austin Aquatic System*

The Task Force reviewed the proposed Master Plan and the concerns listed therein. The data is clear that decades of inadequate aquatic infrastructure funding and investment led not only to ongoing maintenance problems but also to an inability to carry out regular upgrades, thus leaving the aquatic system in the current crisis situation. At our engagement event focused solely on public input, we heard loud and clear that the public loves their neighborhood and community pools and the public strongly requests that the City of Austin keep those pools open. The public also prefers fewer large Regional Outdoor Aquatic Centers.

We believe that regional, neighborhood, and community pools are an important part of Austin's health and wellness and must be preserved. A robust aquatic system is aligned with the Imagine Austin plan to keep Austin healthy, compact, and connected. Swimming is a lifelong

leisure and wellness activity – one that can be promoted and maintained only through a healthy citywide aquatics system.

We do not consider it appropriate to maintain the status quo—taking pools out of service year after year until the city pool system has fewer, not more, facilities for an ever-growing population. Rather, we believe that every effort should be made to invest in our comprehensive aquatic system through end-of-life replacement for existing pools and adding new facilities to meet the needs of neglected areas of our city.

Why end-of-life replacement instead of continued repairs? A significant investment in a pool may extend the life of an existing pool for a few years, but a full replacement may be necessary to ensure long-term use of a pool. It is frequently more financially responsible to completely replace an existing pool rather than make only some repairs to maintain an existing pool in an inferior condition. Repairs exceeding a certain threshold are characterized as a renovation and require the pool and pool area to be brought up to current code. Meeting current code standards adds cost, but is necessary under Austin ordinance and State law.

Therefore, we recommend the following:

**2018 Bond**

1. On the November 2018 general election ballot, include a stand-alone bond proposition exclusively for aquatics facilities in the amount of \$124,000,000.
2. The bond proposition should include all end-of-functional life pool replacements for pools listed in years 0 through 5 within the Draft Aquatic Master Plan.
3. The costs for the pool replacements should be the total cost detailed in the Draft Aquatic Master Plan to bring existing pools up to modern, environmentally sustainable, energy and water efficient, ADA, health, and safety standards.
4. Funding identified by staff to add four additional new pools that would provide public swimming opportunities to populations not currently adequately served by a city pool – Colony Park (NE Austin), NW Austin, SE Austin, and SW Austin.
5. Funding needs to be secured, either as M&O or bond, for capital costs associated with maintenance for pools listed in years 6 through 20 within the Aquatics Master Plan.

Table 1 reflects the pools, pool information, and funding recommended in the Draft Aquatic Master Plan and supported by the Task Force. Infrastructure costs are directly from the Draft Aquatic Master Plan and are not inflation-adjusted. Please note that the Parks and Recreation Department expects that the Colony Park pool will cost closer to \$13,000,000 because of infrastructure challenges outside of the pool area.

Table 1. Aquatic Master Plan Projects Years 0-5 and System Expansion Projects

Facilities	Square Feet of Pool	Total Pool Capacity	3 Year Avg Attendance	Water Used per 1,000 Gallon Pool Volume	Amount
<b>End-Of-Life Facility Replacement</b>					
Balcones	4,853	324	14,858	3,873	\$ 7,423,000
Big Stacy	4,000	217	20,861	11,046	\$ 3,250,650
Brentwood	2,731	182	12,058	8,167	\$ 3,653,650
Civitan	3,515	160	2,833	30,097	\$ 3,705,650
Garrison	14,485	859	25,150	6,161	\$ 9,802,000
Gillis	2,550	143	4,014	21,186	\$ 3,575,650
Givens	11,920	745	14,009	22,913	\$ 5,759,000
Little Stacy	1,590	100	3,708	8,834	\$ 3,034,720
Mabel Davis (Natatorium)	11,717	604	11,155	6,832	\$ 10,140,000
Martin	4,880	277	12,388	1,975	\$ 3,985,150
Montopolis	4,880	277	7,705	5,933	\$ 5,258,500
Northwest	15,642	975	36,643	3,555	\$ 8,684,000
Walnut Creek	14,951	626	14,977	6,119	\$ 5,440,500
					<b>\$ 73,712,470</b>
<b>System Expansion</b>					
Central Aquatic Maintenance Facility					\$ 2,600,000
Colony Park					\$ 13,000,000
NW Austin to replace Canyon Vista					\$ 5,000,000
Southeast Austin					\$ 5,000,000
Southwest Austin					\$ 5,000,000
<b>Funding for Land Acquisition and Civil Engineering to Implement Expansion</b>					<b>\$ 20,000,000</b>
					<b>\$ 50,600,000</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>					<b>\$ 124,312,470</b>

*Public Private Partnerships*

6. A Request for Information (RFI) and subsequent Request for Proposals (RFP) to be released for a public-private partnership in the creation of a premier indoor aquatic center on city-owned property as identified by the City Manager’s office.

*Future Maintenance and Operations Funding*

7. Additionally, in the event maintenance and operations savings resulting from the renovated pools do not entirely offset the expense of the additional new pools, we recommend that the Parks and Recreation Department annual operating budget be increased by the amount needed to maintain each new pool plus all the existing pools as

each pool is opened to the public. Further, expanded pool hours require new funds for additional staff and operating expenses.

*Public Process on Any Future Decommissioning*

8. Finally, we recommend that no individual pool ever be decommissioned without an affirmative vote of the Austin City Council. If in the future, if it is ever impossible to repair or renovate an existing facility and permanent closure appears to staff to be the only solution, then staff must present the City Council with a request to hear the pool conditions and public input. Council will then make a decision either to close the pool or will identify and allocate additional funds to keep the pool open.

Additional Rationale

- Modernizing the City of Austin Aquatics System will eliminate emergency closures and pool replacements that came up over the past decade.
- The modernization will reduce maintenance and operations costs while resolving the substantial facility condition issues resulting from long standing unmet maintenance and operational needs of our pools.
- The maintenance savings should be used for operating the new pools.
- A city natatorium is requested by staff to enable staff to train lifeguards year-round so that many pools can be kept open either for extended months of operation or year-round. In fact, Aquatics Division staff note that the natatorium is a pre-condition for any extension of pool hours within the system. Such a facility would be indoor, climate-controlled, include public access, and open year-round. The facility could include outdoor swimming as well.
- To serve the entire system of pools, a centrally located pool maintenance facility is needed to house standard frequently needed parts and supplies, and where maintenance staff has planning and workspace.
- It will take a comprehensive aquatics bond to win enough support from City of Austin voters and therefore new pools included in years 6-10 are brought forward to gain the support citywide.

**B. POLICY GUIDANCE ON EXISTING CRITERIA FOR POOL RANKING**

We, the Task Force, as well as members of the public who attended our public input session discussed possible new criteria. We support inclusion of existing criteria:

1. Demographics, including current use, residential density—including future population;
2. Site Conditions, including any local impediments to improving some part of the pool;
3. Location, including distance from any other aquatic facility;
4. Accessibility, including anything that prohibits improving accessibility;
5. Infrastructure, such as the type and age of the pump and the filtering device;
6. Environmental, particularly sustainability;

7. Regulatory, such as zoning and ADA requirements; and
8. Operations, the cost and difficulty of maintaining the pool.

These factors added together result in the Site Suitability Rating Score. This score has been applied to every aquatic facility in the city system, and those with the lowest overall score would be, all other things being equal, those expected to have the lowest chance of continued operation should the facility reach the end of operational life.

We also recommend adding historical and cultural factors as additional criteria for the site suitability score. Staff are adding a new chapter on historic and cultural significance to the Draft Aquatic Master Plan. Additional discussions were held regarding protecting pools originally built to segregate City of Austin residents. It was noted that these pools, although originally created under a discriminatory municipal plan and policies, also reinforced a sense of community and ownership.

Staff recommends the following pools be considered of unique historic and cultural importance:

- Barton Springs
- Deep Eddy
- Big Stacy
- Rosewood
- Parque Zaragosa

Every effort should be made to keep the above pools operational, based on historical and cultural importance and the Task Force concurs. The Site Suitability Index should include historic and cultural factors considered at a higher priority when a pool facility is at point of replacement or decommissioning.

The Task Force recommends that patterns of use and population projections should be reviewed biennially to ensure that planning maintains pace with Austin's rapidly expanding and moving population. Even when Parks and Recreation Department is not actively designing a pool facility, the City should gather data regularly so that that data is available when needed.

### **C. POLICY GUIDANCE ON ACCESS FOR RESIDENTS WHO DO NOT HAVE ACCESS**

The Task Force agrees that current data indicate the most need for new regional pools exists in the following general areas.

- Colony Park (Northeast Austin)
- Northwest Austin
- Southeast Austin
- Southwest Austin

As Austin continues to grow and expand outwards, additional geographically underserved areas may arise, and at some time in the future, the plan may need to be amended to include additional new regional pools. A new maintenance facility in Far East, Southeast, or Northeast, may be required to increase efficiency as traffic grows with the city's population.

If any future consolidation or moving of a regional pool is being considered, accessibility must be considered. (As an example, children close to the St. Johns Pool were expected to transfer to the new Bartholomew Pool, but that would require them to cross 51<sup>st</sup> Street with no protected crossway, so the effect of the closing of St. Johns was that these children have no pool.)

#### **D. POLICY GUIDANCE ON CREATIVE FUNDING SOURCES**

Three items the Task Force discussed would increase pool funding and help offset costs.

- 1. Since the public pools clearly serve a public interest (providing exercise and cooling during hot summer months), we recommend that Austin Energy & Austin Water grant "at cost" rates for water and electricity used to run the public pools. Parks and Recreation Department currently pays full rate for utilities at all facilities, and this reduction could result in positive savings for pool expenses that could be diverted to maintenance. New facilities should also include solar panels to reduce electricity use. This will be particularly helpful with the natatorium.*
- 2. Rather than automatically turning over all fees for pool usage to the city's General Fund, return all fees for pool usage to the Park and Recreation Department Aquatics capital improvement fund or for use on pool maintenance or operations. Directing pool fees to the Park and Recreation Department should not be in lieu of any existing funding or future allocation to the Park and Recreation Department.*
- 3. Austinites generally appear willing to pay individual fees for an expanded swim season and for early and late hours at existing pools.*

Through the Task Force's public engagement session, and those held during the planning and preparation of the Aquatics Master Plan, some members of the public often said they would prefer to pay a small fee to swim in a public pool than to lose the pools. Others want to keep public pool use free. We clearly heard that Austinites want public pools where their children can learn to swim, and all ages can swim together, rather than swim parks. And although most would prefer to pay a small fee than to lose pools altogether, we believe that the bond is a better idea, and we further believe there is support for a special aquatics bond to keep the neighborhood and community pools running, as well as to expand the number of regional pools.

## **E. POLICY GUIDANCE ON OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIPS**

We the Task Force also support the development of an indoor natatorium to be jointly funded by and shared with some partner(s) such as Dell/Seton Hospital, the University of Texas, Austin Independent School District, or even some private partner(s). Additional City of Austin departments that may share a need for water safety instruction include Austin Police, Emergency Medical Services, and Fire, all of which might be partners. This pool would be open to the public those hours when it is not in use for lifeguard and water safety instruction or the public uses required by the public partner(s).

Finally, we also discussed such funding sources as working with companies or entities that may be interested in helping to build a new pool in an underserved area in exchange for naming rights. We hope this would not result in naming of facilities by brand names, but rather by names of foundations and/or key individuals in such organizations.

