

Douglas Southgate
Presentation to Worthington City Council
6 February 2023

Council President Robinson, Pro Tem Brewer, members of the City Council. I am grateful for the opportunity to report on the state of Worthington Pools.

My remarks this evening draw on observations made as a member of the board of directors of SWIMINC – the non-profit entity that developed and manages Worthington Pools. I joined the board in 2018 and have served as president since late last summer.

My message is simple. Our facilities (indoor as well as outdoor) have served this community at least twice as long as a reasonable estimate of their expected lifetimes. SWIMINC's staff deserves much credit for keeping the pools running up till now. But a simple choice between reconstructing our facilities and closing them is upon us. If reconstruction is to happen, support from the city will be essential.

Each of the alternatives can be accomplished in different ways. Reconstruction, for example, can take the form of remodeling and updating the pools and buildings that already exist. Or greater changes can be made in that infrastructure.

If no investment is made in reconstruction, our pools will close before too long. There might be one final season in 2024, to mark the 70th anniversary of our outdoor facilities, followed by a safe and orderly decommissioning. But there is another way to shutter the pools permanently, which is as a result of catastrophic failure.

The danger of such a failure, which SWIMINC and its capable and dedicated employees work hard to prevent, is underscored by a 2022 episode. Fewer than two weeks before the Memorial Day weekend, when the summer season always begins, chief engineer Chad Davis

observed seepage around a central pump. Further investigation uncovered a 10-inch steel pipe dating from the 1960s that was severely oxidized. The pipe was replaced immediately, so catastrophic failure was avoided – on this occasion! Fair to say, few of the thousand or more Worthington residents who flocked to the pool during the holiday weekend had any idea how close they had come to needing to find another place to swim.

SWIMINC hopes to continue serving those residents for many years to come. But its capacity to pay for the investment needed to save Worthington Pools is limited. The land where our facilities are located belongs to Worthington City Schools, not SWIMINC. So we cannot issue bonds. Nor can we borrow from a bank.

Self-financing of reconstruction is also preempted because the prices we charge for memberships, lessons, etc. must be in line with prices charged by nearby pools built and subsidized by municipal governments. Our summer revenues cover the expenses of operating and maintaining our outdoor facilities, which is an impressive accomplishment. However, cash reserves after Labor Day, when those facilities close, are small relative to reconstruction costs.

Compounding the challenge of self-financing is the escalation of reconstruction expenses. Part of this escalation relates to inflation. Additionally, reconstruction expenses have increased because we have no choice other than to comply with regulations adopted long after our existing facilities were put in place.

Squeezed between pricing realities that hinder the self-financing of capital improvements and the escalation of reconstruction expenses, many community pools run by non-profit enterprises have shuttered themselves. The Mount Air Pool, barely a couple miles from here, did so several years ago. So did the Olympic Pool, in Clintonville.

Intending to avoid this outcome, SWIMINC has worked for years on a strategy for redevelopment. In November 2019, a townhall was held at Thomas Worthington High School to gather community input. Based on that input, a request for proposals soon followed. Nine firms responded and Brandstetter-Carroll was selected to go forward with project design. But then COVID intervened. With no revenues coming in because all our operations ceased for several months, all planning for reconstruction had to be suspended.

Interest in redevelopment was rekindled in 2021, when the City of Worthington, Worthington City Schools, and SWIMINC considered the possibility of a Joint Recreational District, or JRD, that would invest in pools, parks, and related facilities throughout the school district. The JRD option has been rendered moot because Worthington City Schools won voters' support in November 2022 for Phase II of the Master Facilities Plan, which includes replacement of the natatorium. Thanks to this development, SWIMINC is now focusing on the reconstruction of its outdoor facilities.

Planning for these facilities will be supervised by Kurt Carmen, who is SWIMINC's executive director. One of the Midwest's foremost experts on aquatic management and development, Kurt oversaw construction of the aquatic pavilion at Ohio State University during the early 2000s and later advised the City of Upper Arlington on redevelopment of its outdoor pools. We are lucky to have him on our team.

On January 23rd, SWIMINC's board of directors voted to engage the services of Brandstetter-Carroll, which by the end of May will deliver design and development options along with cost estimates for the outdoor facilities. Maria Andersen, an architect as well as our vice president and chair of the facilities committee, will now tell you more about this work.