

**JOURNAL OF COMMISSION WORK SESSION**  
**December 20, 2011**

City Commission Work Session

Mayor Winters presiding

**CALL TO ORDER:** 5:30 p.m.

**ROLL CALL:** City Commissioners present: Michael J. Winters, Bill Bronson, Fred Burow, Mary Jolley, and Robert Jones. Also present were the Deputy City Manager; Directors of Fiscal Services, Park and Recreation, Planning and Community Development, and Public Works; Interim Police Chief; and the Administrative Secretary.

**1. MAYOR/COMMISSION/NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL SWEARING IN CEREMONY**

Cascade County District Court Judge Dirk M. Sandefur performed the swearing in ceremony for Mayor Winters, Commissioners Bronson and Jolley, and Neighborhood Council members.

**2. SWIMMING POOLS MARKETING STRATEGIES**

Park and Recreation Director Marty Basta reported that during the 2009 budgeting process, staff presented the Commission with a proposal to increase swimming pool fees. The Commission denied approval of Resolution 9827, which would have increased pool fees. Since that time, staff has substantially reduced pool operating costs.

Mr. Basta noted the current focus is on enhancing pool revenues without a fee increase. Considerations include pool passes; resident vs. non-resident fees; marketing pools through partnerships; and marketing strategies.

Park and Recreation Aquatics Supervisor Marian Permann presented a video pictorial presentation of the Great Falls pools.

Ms. Permann also provided a PowerPoint aquatics presentation. The benefits of aquatics include recreational opportunities for youth. Last year the Natatorium served over 1,000 children in swimming lessons. Physical activity for adults and youth is very important, and a huge elderly population uses the Natatorium. Water is the best medium for recovery from injuries, illness, and surgeries. Water therapy breaks the cycle of chronic pain, combats the aging process, and improves the quality of life for those with chronic illnesses. Swimming and boating lessons in the pools go hand-in-hand; parent/tot classes provide a bonding time; and canoe and kayak classes are available.

Ms. Permann reported proposals for the Electric City Water Park (ECWP) include resident/non-resident fees with a 15% increase for non-residents. Changing hours of operation to 11 a.m.-6 p.m. six days a week and an extended week day (11 a.m.-8 p.m.) for a family night would allow for additional/earlier rental times, scheduling and retaining lifeguards, and catching visitors passing through Great Falls on their way to the National Parks.

Changes for ECWP fees would include rental tubes on a first-come, first-served basis; one cashier position would be eliminated. Youth fees would increase from \$8 to \$9; adults would increase from \$9 to \$10. One wristband entrance tier fee would be eliminated, saving approximately \$1,000 per year on the cost of wristbands. A total projected revenue increase would be \$41,360.

ECWP discounts considered include season passes and punch passes. Successful around Montana is a 30-punch pass, at a 25% savings. The cost would be \$200 for youth and \$225 for adult residents, and \$230 for youth and \$260 for adult non-residents.

Commissioner Jolley noted someone would have to go to the ECWP twenty times to pay for their pass. She questioned how often people go to the park. Ms. Permann responded water parks generally use a base number of 36 when people purchase a season pass.

Mayor Winters questioned what age groups would be eligible for a pass. Ms. Permann responded that children under 3 years are free with a paying adult, and additional children under 3 pay \$1. A pass would apply for ages 3 through 17.

Commissioner Burow questioned if a punch pass would have an expiration date. Ms. Permann responded that some parks allow the passes to be carried over for one year and some require them to be used that season.

Deputy City Manager Jennifer Reichelt noted that Showdown ski area allows passes to be used beyond the season, but fee increases are charged.

Mr. Basta noted there was also discussion for allowing several people to use the same punch pass.

Commissioner Bronson agreed that a wet season is another reason to extend use of a pass.

Mayor Winters questioned the use of a punch pass for large families. Ms. Permann responded that a punch pass could be used for all the children.

Commissioner Burow noted he would be in favor of allowing a punch pass to be used a second year.

Mr. Basta commented there is a potential loss of revenue associated with passes, depending upon the amount of the discount. The proposed discount is conservative; if the passes become popular, the amount of the discount may be reconsidered.

Ms. Permann commented the pools are probably the best babysitter in town; the pools are safe. The Police Department responds within two minutes to any reported concern.

Ms. Reichelt asked the amount that would be saved when purchasing a pass. Ms. Permann responded a pass would provide a \$2.40 savings per time.

Ms. Permann reported the proposed future for ECWP includes increasing eye appeal and programming. Adding pictures of the flowrider, slides, activities, etc. would make the entryway

welcoming. Another possibility would involve working with organizations like AAA that distribute their information throughout the United States and providing a discount to members.

Ms. Permann reported cabanas (a tent enclosure) are popular in water parks. Missoula charges \$75 per day for a cabana. She is also working with the FAST swim team and considering co-sponsoring a swim meet June 21-22, 2012 with the possibility of bringing 500-700 people to Great Falls. Parents may want to purchase a wristband for their other children.

Plans also include meeting with representatives of Alive @5 to consider a co-promotion. While parents are in one park, children could be in the water park. A dive-in is another possibility where a movie is shown on a big sheet while teens and tweens (ages 10-13) are in the water. Other ideas include air guitar competitions, a puppy paddle, and bringing the ECWP penguin mascot for more exposure.

Marketing plans include having hotels/motels display ECWP materials and provide transportation for the water park; working with AAA; doing Facebook and Twitter promotions; and working with the Great Falls Transit District to assist with parking issues.

Commissioner Burow noted a parking garage is across the street from the downtown transfer station. Mr. Basta stated that plans are to meet with the Transit Board for ideas.

Ms. Permann reported ECWP currently has a promotion with the Great Falls Voyagers for discounted packs of tickets/passes, and each will visit the other organization. Mr. Basta added the Voyagers contacted the Park and Recreation Department because of similar successes around their league.

Ms. Permann reported the neighborhood pools have had very good attendance since the renovation. Proposed resident fees would include a renewable eligibility card to receive a discount. Punch cards have also been requested as an option.

Proposals for the Natatorium include adding a non-resident fee; new programming such as clinics and workshops for improving swim strokes and training for a triathlon; offering community CPR and First Aid; building relationships with community organizations such as the Great Falls Clinic; upgrading equipment; dive-ins, especially for the tweens; increasing inflatables; and completing an entryway facelift with donated labor by Dick Olson Construction.

Mr. Basta reported that a structural analysis of the Natatorium showed no significant problems. The deep end of the pool is in ground water and a shallow ground water monitoring well was recommended. No determination was given for the source of seeping water in the basement

Commission Burow questioned if the final payment should be made to the engineering firm. Mr. Basta responded the project engineer stated that sometimes a determination cannot be made for a source of water.

Mr. Basta reported that a lot of work has been done on the Natatorium with the help of grants. A grant application is currently being prepared for the boiler. He also noted the air exchanger can be

mounted on the roof at a much lower price. He reported the study provided a year-by-year budget over 50 years for repairs and maintenance of approximately \$950,000 or \$20,000 per year.

Commissioner Burow asked if recommendations were given for the water problem. Mr. Basta responded that water flowed into the basement for about a month. After weep holes were drilled through the wall, water came out at about 30 gallons an hour for about a week. The problem has not reoccurred again. A copy of the study is available in the City Clerk's office.

Commissioner Burow questioned the ground water under the pool. Ms. Permann responded there is a sump pump at the bottom of the pool. Mayor Winters commented that much of Great Falls sits on springs and the gumbo makes the ground water move to a weaker area.

Ms. Permann reported that significant improvements on the Natatorium, including the pool liner, the grate system, and the main drain, were done through grants. Additional improvements include having the roof redone, the mechanical chase, the outdoor reader board, sidewalk ADA upgrade/replacement, and other ADA improvements.

Commissioner Burow questioned the leaks around the plumbing after filling in of dirt around the pool some years ago. Mr. Basta responded that since the pool deck was failing, a decision was made to fill in the pipe chase with concrete slurry. No additional leaks have been observed in the last year and a half. The pipe chase system should be replaced with a system that would drain into the pool.

Ms. Permann concluded that national trends in aquatics show adding amenities and creating new programs every four/five years will increase users and ensure quality aquatics facilities. She noted that many water parks are adding miniature golf as an option on a cold day.

Ms. Basta commented that the Park and Recreation Department is pro-actively looking at ways to reduce or keep the pool subsidies in check. Operating expenses in the pool fund this year have been reduced \$72,000.

Mayor Winters questioned the status of recommendations from a meeting with Mr. Basta and NC 7 representative Aaron Weissman including changing the doors to entry and exist, aquatic products, and scheduling part-time, flexible employees. Mr. Basta responded that after the entryway facelift, the remodeling staff will explore the other ideas.

Mayor Winters added additional considerations may include adding tai chi on the deck, a non-aquatic activity and advertising with Gold's Gym. He added that he is totally against raising fees and is not sure he likes charging tourists additional fees.

Commissioner Bronson commented that he liked the proposal details. Commissioner Jolley noted she would not be adverse to having non-residents pay additional fees.

Ms. Reichelt noted it is important to consider the dollar amount of a 15% increase. Ms. Permann stated that on \$10, a 15% increase would be \$1.50.

Ms. Permann reported there is a tai chi program called ai chi which is the same movement done in water. She added there is a certified zumba instructor who would like to offer classes at the Natatorium.

Ms. Permann commended the aquatic staff.

Commissioner Jones expressed support for the proposed change in hours of operation, possibly making a change to 11 a.m.-8 p.m. for two days, instead of just one. He applauded Ms. Permann's enthusiasm.

Commissioner Burow agreed with the proposed change in hours. He also suggested a proposal for hotels/motels to pay or discount ECWP fees.

Deputy Director of Park and Recreation Patty Rearden reported that under a test program the last few years, the Holiday Inn purchased ECWP passes on their web site. Staff also promoted them, and most of them were sold.

Mayor Winters questioned what opportunities are available for children who cannot afford the fees. Ms. Permann responded the Junior Lifeguard program is available for tweens. After receiving special training, they can help with swim lessons at the Natatorium or assist lifeguards at ECWP and receive a free ECWP pass for each day they help.

### ADJOURN

There being no further discussion, Mayor Winters adjourned the work session of December 20, 2011, at 6:39 p.m.