

El Segundo approves design for \$10 million ‘crown jewel’ swimming pool

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Hoping to offer the region a crown jewel athletic facility, the city of El Segundo has settled on the biggest and priciest design option for a new Olympic-size swimming pool, but called on the city school district and the community to help cover the \$10 million price tag.

The outdoor swimming pool, to be built on the site of the new Wiseburn High School now under construction at 201 N. Douglas Ave., will offer a wide range of public learn-to-swim and fitness programs, house high school and regional competitions, and could accommodate niche trainings such as scuba diving or synchronized swimming.

The city and Wiseburn School District reached a settlement in 2013, with Wiseburn contributing \$6 million toward a new pool on the high school campus, and the city agreeing to cover any additional construction costs, along with the operation and ongoing maintenance of the pool.

The city had battled over construction of the new high school for the district, which serves children in Hawthorne and unincorporated areas east of El Segundo, but with the settlement agreed to stop disputing the environmental analysis of the project or file a legal challenge.

Last week, the City Council was presented with three design options for the aquatics facility that had been hammered out by a pool committee and city staff — a base model, hybrid or the upgrade.

Told that the upgraded pool, while most expensive to construct, would offer the city the most flexibility with programming and the highest amount of revenue down the road, the council decided to go big.

“We’re a town of world champions. We have two huge sports entities in town currently,” Councilwoman Marie Fellhauer said. “I would hate to see us build something and later regret not having built the very best right now. It really could be a jewel of the South Bay.”

The upgraded \$10.6 million design includes a 54-by-25-meter main competition pool of 10 lanes, a shallow, warm-water teaching and warm-up pool, 900 spectator seats and 500 athlete seats, along with lighting, locker rooms, parking and removable bulkheads. It was also the only option to include three 1-meter diving boards.

Although the upgraded design is projected to have a \$42,000 operating deficit in the first couple years, it is expected to save the city more than \$40,000 for all of its aquatics operations after year three, said Parks and Recreation Director Meredith Petit.

“It’s hard to believe, but basically, by putting in those two pools, our annual operating budget for the city in aquatics will be less, bottom line,” she said.

Petit expects the participation in city swim lessons to increase by 300 percent once the new pool is built.

“Right now, The Plunge just cannot accommodate the demand we have,” she said. “When we add a second pool, we’re opening up so much space. We’ll be able to beef up the programming at The Plunge and the new pool. We believe the demand is there.”

Petit expects the new pool to be used for anything from Aqua Zumba and deepwater jogging to kids’ birthday parties and scuba diving training.

Meanwhile, the city’s 75-year-old indoor pool, Urho Saari Swim Stadium or The Plunge, continues to deteriorate. The plan, once the new pool is built, is to shut down The Plunge for renovations. Those repairs are expected to cost the city \$800,000 to \$1 million, Petit said.

Over the last several years, the city has built up \$1.8 million in an aquatics fund.

Council members suggested Tuesday that the city could use that fund for the new pool and later fundraise or find additional revenues for The Plunge renovations.

But Councilman Carl Jacobson worried that if the council dedicates its entire aquatics fund for the new facility, The Plunge might never be rehabbed.

“I don’t want to give up on the Urho Saari redo. It’s been a historical item. To close it would be unthinkable,” he said. “To take some of that money to put into (the new pool), and put off (fixing The Plunge) is not acceptable to me.”

Others agreed, but recognized that the city now faces a tough obstacle: how to cover the additional construction costs (\$4.6 million) for the upgraded design option.

On Tuesday, the council received a surprise donation — El Segundo businessman Richard Lundquist agreed to give \$1 million to the new pool. He will also spearhead a fundraising campaign to cover the additional construction costs.

To cover the additional \$3.6 million, the council said it now relies on the community to step up.

“This is a difficult decision because we are committing a lot of money to a pool that doesn’t belong to us,” Mayor Suzanne Fuentes said. “If everyone is going to step up with half a million, a million dollars, I would like to see the school district step up also. The driver for this was our teens.”

El Segundo High School also would use the new pool for its water polo and swimming programs.

The city received dozens of emails, many from parents of high school students involved in aquatics, in support of the new, world-class aquatic facility.

“I think this new pool is going to be a rebirth of our aquatics programs,” resident Lee Davis said.

Construction on the pool is expected to begin later this year. An opening date has not yet been set.

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