

Village Looks to New Pool to Meet Long-Term Needs

by Courtney Cameron
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[Photos courtesy of McFarland School District]

The McFarland School District of South Central Wisconsin has been slowly outgrowing its aquatics facilities for decades. Built in 1978, the original Angie O'Donnell Aquatic Center has a six-lane rectangular competition pool that is in constant demand, both from students and across the village's demographic spectrum. Now, after a years-long planning and approval process, the facility will be flexing its boundaries to make room for the flood of interest that consistently meets its programming.

Welcome space

A referendum passed in November 2016 has allowed the McFarland Pool, located at the district's high school, to be transformed into a new facility within the same building. The new 10-lane pool will offer an extended eight lanes for competition, with an additional two lanes for swimmers to warm up. Along with more space, the new facility will offer expanded locker rooms for both student-athletes and the community at large, as well as expanded spectator seating, improved accessibility, and a diving board that will allow the high school to try its hand at competitive team diving. The current pool will be filled in and turned into a new fitness center for the high school.

When asked what the new facility has that the old pool didn't, aquatics director Stu Schaefer didn't hesitate — it's space. "With the new facility, just the sheer space in general, that's going to be the best part," he said.

In the original facility, the high volume of lessons and programming meant that everyone felt the constraints. "Like in our lesson program: kids couldn't swim very far without running into another class, or the lane lines for another group. With swimming, you have to foster some endurance to get better at it, so if kids are practicing just 10 meters at a time, there are limitations."

Schaefer also looks forward to a spacious and versatile pool deck, with retractable bleacher seating for up to 500 spectators and a mezzanine deck that will provide an opportunity to

host Pilates and other dry-land fitness programs.

Juggling high demand

The McFarland Pool caters to a wide audience, with age-specific programming available for everyone in the community, from youth learn-to-swim to senior fitness. This includes nearly 1,200 participants in summer lessons and nearly 200 participants in the youth swim team, along with competition teams for girls and boys at the high school level, physical education classes for grades one through 11, community lap swimming and water aerobics. Says Schaefer, "Our structure has met the needs of our public for a long time, but we've had to be crafty with finding a right balance and managing pool time so we don't take away from our community programs. That's always been a big challenge through the years."

The current facility continues to offer community swimming lessons during the school year, though the hours shift to weekends only, making way for increased practice time by the high school competition swim teams and grade-based fitness classes. To keep up with so many user groups, the pool staff keeps long hours, opening at 5:15 a.m. and closing at 8:45 p.m. most days of the week. According to Schaefer, the staff is well-accustomed to juggling the facility's high demand. "The great thing is that our coaches are also members and work at our facility as senior managers. We're all part of the same program and we're all working toward the same goal, so we've gotten really good at sharing and just kind of finding a way. A lot of times you have to divide the space by the number of people who are interested in an event or program and try to give everybody a fair shot."



With an additional four lanes, the new pool offers users much more room to operate.

Community buy-in

The need for space being felt so widely by different groups in the community was a boon for the McFarland Pool when it came to asking for expansion funding. With active participants invested in the project throughout the school and community, it was slightly less painful than usual to get support and gain approval. "I think there was a good push from people in lessons realizing how tight it was, and also from our swim team because of the limited space and availability," Schaefer says. "The push came from a lot of different areas, which was great because then it was a little more real for the community to say, 'Yes. Let's go ahead and do this.' "

The district worked with longtime partner Findorff of Madison, Wis., to construct the pool, as well as Water Technology of Beaver Dam and Badger Swim pools of Prairie Du Sac. According to Schaefer, the design team, as well as school administrators, were fully invested when it came to facilitating community input and helping to develop a project concept. "They really did a nice job of polling the coaches and community on their needs. When this pool goes in, it's going to be great because we've thought about everything from senior citizens to little swimmers, and of course our swim team," he says, describing an

accessible shallow end composed of a full side of steps that doubles as a teaching platform for lower-level lessons.

In fact, Schaefer advocates community input as one of the crucial steps for a successful project. "I think if somebody's wanting to get something like this for their community, polling and getting the signatures if you know there's interest there would be a good first step," he says. "And our administrators were great in actually listening to people's voices, on everything from what our coaches and our lesson programs needed to our senior citizens and their water exercise needs."

Open house

Now, as classes start up again for the year, Schaeffer and staff are thankful that the center afforded enough space to build a completely new pool, rather than expanding the existing one, as it has allowed them to stay open during construction. Schaeffer is looking forward to an opening date toward the end of the spring semester — April or May, if all goes according to plan — and is already scheming to introduce the community to its new pool with a flourish.

"I'm still working on it," he says. "The school year is going to be busy and the transition obviously is going to be a bit of a challenge. I would like to offer an open house. I'd probably have to do it based on our schools, offering it open for the first and second graders at the primary school, and then continue on through the grades from there. We also have a ton of non-resident interest in our lesson program and in our swim team. Even our Fun and Fitness, which is our senior exercise program, brings in a lot of non-residents. So I'm going to have to do something there as well to open up our doors and allow people to have a little tour and then some open swim time, so they can check it out as well."

Details for opening tours will be posted to the facility's website at mcfarlandcommunitypool.com.

When asked if the new McFarland Pool is outfitted to continue adding new features in the future, Schaefer says, "Not really." In regards to expansion, he hopes the extensive research and community involvement the district took the time to process means the facility will be a long-term solution in itself. "I just hope that we hit the nail on the head and got everything that we need so that we don't have to think about that down the road."

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