

I. Introduction to the Madison Situation

No public swimming pools currently exist in the City of Madison, nor have any such pools existed in the past. The lack of a municipal swimming facility is unusual for a city as large as Madison, with a population of over 208,000 residents situated in 64 square miles, and a 2003 capital budget of \$108 million (visitmadison.com; Derby, 1A). A debate over whether or not to build a swimming pool (or pools), however, has been part of the public discourse for several decades.

As early as the 1950s, the city parks department was studying potential locations for building a municipal pool (Morgan). Nonetheless, for a long time, a municipal swimming pool was an unnecessary luxury. This was because the majority of Madison's residents were living in close proximity to the areas major lakes – Mendota, Monona, and Wingra – which are concentrated around the center core of the city. Since the 1980s, however, residential patterns have changed in Madison, and more and more people are living in the eastern and western edges of the city, and thus farther from the lakes (Morgan). In addition, the last several years have seen an increase in health concerns in Madison's lakes, ranging from algae in Lake Mendota to an E.Coli outbreak that has closed Lake Wingra since July of 2003 (Faulk, 11A; Blousek, B1).

The most recent study of municipal pool options was conducted in 1989. The report analyzed the feasibility of twelve different potential locations, and estimated how much it would cost to build a small pool (4,380 to 5000 square feet), medium-sized pool (9,500 to 10,400 sq. ft.), large pool (15,000 to 16,300 square feet), and an extended season large pool at each of those sites. The small pool, which could hold 425-500 people at one time, ranged in price from \$1.2 million to \$2.9 million depending on the

location. The price tag for the medium sized pool, with an 800 to 1100-person capacity, ranged from \$1.4 million to \$1.6 million. The large pool could fit 1500 to 1650 patrons at a total cost of \$2.2 to 2.4 million, while an extended season (nine month) large pool would cost \$2.5 million (Burbach, 194-213).

The engineers report recommended that the city build three large pools; one on the east side, on the west side, and a central facility in Olin/Turville Park, the latter of which would contain not only a seasonal recreational pool but also an extended-season competitive pool. In total this called for 52,000 ft² of pool surface area, which could be completed between 1992 and 1995 (Burbach, 217-221).

The decision over whether to build the central Olin Park pool was put in the hands of Madison taxpayers in a 1992 referendum. The voters sided against the pool construction, but not necessarily because of money issues. According to Superintendent of Parks Jim Morgan, the city would have paid for the pool over a 15-year period, making the annual cost relatively insignificant. Rather, Morgan attributes the failure of the referendum to conflicts over the chosen location. In 1992, only one side of Olin Park was neighbored by a City of Madison residential neighborhood, and the location was not convenient to bus and car transportation. Additionally, the park is a treasured environmental site, because of its view of the Madison skyline and the oak trees that line its paths (Morgan).

In fact, when the engineering firm that produced the alternatives report in 1989 (unscientifically) polled Madison residents about their feelings on the city building a pool, respondents were in favor by nearly a two to one ratio (Burbach, A-1). Therefore it is possible that in 1992 voters did not side against *a* public pool, but rather a public pool

at *Olin Park*. Nonetheless, there remain Madison residents who are opposed to any public pools at taxpayer expense.

The most common reason cited by pool opponents is the wealth of swimming facilities in Madison. According to the 1989 study, there are 38 swimming facilities in the Madison metropolitan area. Of nine outdoor pools, two are owned by municipalities, and seven are privately owned and have membership costs. Of 15 indoor pools, 6 are located at Madison school district facilities, 2 are at YMCAs, 3 are located at colleges, and 4 are part of private health clubs. Madison also boasts a wealth of natural swimming facilities – 14 beaches along its many lakes (Burbek,103-105).

These municipal pools are operated outside of the City (in the towns of Middleton and Sauk Prairie), and the private pools charge significant fees for membership. The Madison School District, University of Wisconsin, and Madison Area Technical College Pools, serve many different functions and offer only limited hours for public swim. Most unfortunately, Madison's lakes have been plagued in recent years by water quality issues. An E.Coli outbreak closed Lake Wingra for the entire spring and summer of 2003, and weeds and algae have plagued Madison's lakes for several years (Blousek, 2A; Schuetz, B3). Often after a period of rain, lakes will be closed because of bacteria contamination (Morgan).

Many residents were opposed to the city building swimming pools because they were opposed to the possible tax increase that they would incur. Some of those in the opposition expressed that a swimming pool is a facility that people built for themselves, with their own money; rather than a shared resource that the municipality should use tax money to build (Burbach, A22-A28). This 'I'll build it myself' mentality is more feasible

in Madison than in many other parts of the country; at \$49,223, the median household income is well above national and state averages (www.census.gov).

Sue Bauman revived the political initiative for swimming pools, when as mayor in 2002, when she inserted \$10,000 into Madison's 2003 fiscal budget to study potential pool sites (Kalk, 1A). The new mayor, Dave Cieslewicz has set as a priority the opening of at least one municipal pool during his term, and starting in January, 2004 an ad hoc committee of city officials and residents will meet to formulate ideas for building and financing an aquatic facility or facilities, with the new challenge of tight budget constraints (Morgan). Parks Superintendent Morgan wants to build four swimming pools – one for each side of Madison – at a cost of \$2.5 million per pool, with the financing split between government and private funds. Morgan is optimistic that 'now is the time' for public pools in Madison, but several decades of city history show that even a majority consensus can sink through the water.

While Madison has no municipal pools, small and medium sized cities in the Midwest and throughout the country often have not only one but often multiple public pools. In the following case studies, we will analyze how Madison's uniqueness in geography and income, as well in age distribution, compared to select U.S. cities, accounts for disparities in municipal pool facilities.

Works Cited

- Blousek, Mary. "Vilas Beach Likely to Stay Closed for Season." *Wisconsin State Journal* 23 August 2003: B1.
- Burbach, D.F., et al. Engineer's Report on the City of Madison Municipal Pool Alternative. Written by D.F. Burbach Municipal & Civil Engineers for the City of Madison, September, 1989. On reserve at the UW-Madison Geography Library.
- Derby, Samara Kalk. "Pool Proponents Laud Buaman's Plan, but Remain Skeptical." *Capital Times* 5 December 2002: 1A.
- Faulk, Kathleen. "Lakes can be blue, lawns green without phosphorus." *Capital Times* 24 September: 11A
- Morgan, James. Personal interview. 1 December 2003.
- Schuetz, Lisa. "Lawn Phosphorus Ban Considered." *Wisconsin State Journal* 3 September 2003: B3.
- Madison and Dane County Geography. Accessed via the internet at www.visitmadison.com.
- 2000 Census statistics. Accessed via the internet at www.census.gov.