

Easthampton leaders welcome comment on pool fate

By CATHERINE BAUM Staff Writer

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EASTHAMPTON – The pool at White Brook will not reopen until at least 2012 – if it reopens at all.

The School Committee noted funding for the pool's repair is not included in Mayor Michael A. Tautznik's five-year capital improvement plan, prompting a request by the committee that the public discuss the pool's value at a Jan. 31 meeting planned for 7 p.m. at White Brook.

"Public input is valuable since the School Committee members represent the public," said Brian Fink, of the committee. "There hasn't been a lot of public input. This is a community-wide issue."

The pool is expected to cost nearly \$600,000 to reopen, about \$200,000 of which is reserved for the project, and about \$400,000 of which is needed to complete the project, according to the committee.

"I know it's a very big expense," said Morgan Mitchell, president of the Aquatic Club in Easthampton. "But if you place that expense against trying to build a new facility in Easthampton, it would be very hard-pressed."

Meanwhile, the pool is full of water, covered and monitored on a weekly basis, according to Peter Roy, director of maintenance for school buildings.

"It's just sitting idle," Roy said.

Before the pool was closed last winter due to its corroding ventilation system, it was open to the public Monday through Thursday from 7 to 9 p.m., and Saturday through Sunday from 1 to 4 p.m. The attendance ranged from 15 to 50 people during open-swim hours, according to Edward Piziak Jr., director of Parks and Recreation.

"When it was open it was used most of the day seven days a week," Piziak said. "It was a large asset for the community."

Besides open-swim hours, swim lessons and water aerobics programs were available to the public.

Owen Coughlin, who was on the School Committee for more than 25 years, said a couple of seniors expressed their concern to him about losing their opportunities to exercise when the pool closed.

"Swimming is probably one of the easiest ways to exercise, especially if you have limited mobility," Coughlin said. "There was no place else other than the Y in Northampton for them and that was a little further than what they wanted to travel."

In addition to the high school swim team, the Barracudas swim team, of the Western Massachusetts Swim League, practiced and hosted meets at White Brook for more than 30 years before the program concluded in October 2006.

"We kind of saw the writing on the wall with regard to the pool being closed," said Leo Dube, former coach of the Barracudas. "They had a lot of issues with the facility."

Declined enrollment and rising operating expenses were key factors for stopping the Barracudas program, but White Brook's closed facility prevents the program from restarting, Dube said.

He said the Williston Northampton School's pool - an alternative facility the Barracudas considered - is "beautiful," but frequently used for the private school's programs as well as the high school's swim team.

"I don't think they could handle having the Barracudas as well... there's no way," Dube said. "Swimming's the type of sport you need to practice every day. I just wish that the city of Easthampton was more interested."

Donald Poulin, who was on the School Committee for four years, said he thinks city officials need to be responsible to protect community assets like the pool, and questions the School Committee's move to host a public forum about the pool's value.

"I don't know if that's a good barometer of the value of the pool," Poulin said of the forum.

"Do we have a public forum for a leak in a boiler? I mean, think about that."

Still, Poulin said he believes the city should not "abandon" an asset of that size.

"It really comes down to are we committed to having a resource like that or are we going to fill it with sand," Poulin said.

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