

Easthampton residents: Save White Brook pool

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EASTHAMPTON – Nearly 50 people turned out to implore the School Committee to do whatever it takes to fix the now-closed community pool at the White Brook Middle School.

The public speak time at Thursday's school board meeting is given 15 minutes on the agenda, but it went on for more than an hour as swim instructors, parents and competitors in maroon and white jackets asked board members to save the pool.

"The city should be embarrassed that it has allowed such an excellent facility to deteriorate and is now considering its abandonment," Superintendent Deborah Carter said, reading from a letter written by Karen Vayda, of 98 Clark St. "It is very disconcerting that money has not been budgeted over the last 30 years to use for a large scale repair that is inevitable with such a facility as it ages," Vayda wrote in her letter to the board.

City students were among those voicing their support for repairing the pool as soon as possible. The Eagles swim team has been practicing at the Williston Northampton School since the White Brook pool closed last winter, but some students said it's not the same because it's not their own.

"This pool has been a huge part of my life," said Amanda Pinsky, a Southampton senior who attends Hampshire Regional High School, and is a former Western Massachusetts Swim League Barracuda who first used the pool when she was 4.

"Closing it will prevent the memories and future life long skills that I experienced for others," she said.

The 33-year-old pool was closed by the state Board of Health last winter. The board closed it because the HVAC system was collapsing, Carter said. Because the School Department doesn't have the resources to get the pool fixed, the plan is to keep it closed until at least 2012. The estimated \$600,000 in required repairs will be funded through the city's capital funds, and about \$200,000 of the city's capital funds was put on hold for the project last year. Committee members have said they hope the remaining \$400,000 also will come from the city's capital funds - and as soon as possible. The pool's repair was the number one priority in the School Department's capital improvement plan for this year.

But Mayor Michael A. Tautznik's five-year capital improvement plan does not factor in the pool repair, and Tautznik has said there is about \$30 million worth of projects requested of the city, which only has \$350,000 total in capital funds.

"We're going to have to do more with less," Tautznik said at the meeting. He added that he is a proponent of completing the project in stages.

He noted this year's plan does include \$90,000 from the city's capital funds to the School Department for a new maintenance truck and laptops for elementary schools.

Thursday night's discussion stirred some ideas, though no matters were voted on or plans for action made. A student threw out the idea of conducting community fundraisers to help pay for the needed repairs. School Committee Chairman Tom Brown said another possibility is to seek a debt exclusion override for November, to ask the community to consider putting the repair of the pool outside the limits of Proposition 21/2.

Tautznik was wary about that. "The taxpayers pay for everything," he said.

Several people noted that the pool is used by a broad spectrum of the community, including people who are handicapped, elderly people, Boy Scouts and swim organizations. The pool was used for scuba and lifesaving classes as well as water aerobics and programs put on by the Parks and Recreation Department. Before it was closed the pool was used for fifth and sixth grade physical education classes three times a day.

"It really had a lot of use," said Joanne Nadolny, of 39 East Greene St. She added that the city does not have a YMCA, Boys or Girls Club or another school where its residents can swim indoors.

Kathie Stewart, who taught swimming in the White Brook pool for nearly 15 years, said she believes the pool's problems surfaced because it wasn't properly kept up.

Former school board member Donald Poulin said he believes the decline in use of the pool correlates with the decline in the pool's condition. He said the deck and locker rooms were in bad condition, the ceiling was rusted and the leaking roof would blow "freezing cold" air into the pool room. "If a facility is not kept up, it's not going to be fully used," Poulin said.

Eric Yates, a member of the School Committee, said keeping the pool closed sends a bad message for School Choice students looking to join the district.

"I think that the longer we delay to fix this project the more it's going to cost," he added.

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