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New pools make a splash all over area

By Alan Morrell

The sound of construction equipment has replaced the smell of chlorine at Irondequoit High School this year.

A new multimillion-dollar swimming pool is being built, one of several springing up in the Rochester area.

Spencerport and Gates Chili opened their pools this month. West Irondequoit Central School District expects its pool to be done by August 2009, and East Irondequoit hopes to get started soon.

The building boom was planned well before Michael Phelps put the sport in the spotlight with his Olympic heroics. Aging, leaking pools have long needed to be replaced with bigger, modern and more cost-effective versions, school officials said.

"We all built pools about the same time, and they're all wearing out," said Bill Domm, West Irondequoit's assistant superintendent for business. The district is in the midst of building a new pool to replace the one that was constructed in 1958.

"We were putting in a lot of time and money to keep it going. We drained it twice, to fix the leaks. Every time we drained it, the bottom would heave up. The water was holding it down."

School pools are used year-round, by community members as well as students. Swim teams are getting bigger, and the Phelps phenomenon will continue to pump interest into the sport, a local swimming official said.

"I think you're going to see a bump because of the Olympics and what's happened with Michael Phelps," said Henry Savage, the Section V girls

swimming coordinator and boys diving coach at Canandaigua Academy.

He said area girls swim teams average about 23 members and Canandaigua's has 38. Smaller pools make it difficult for everyone to participate, he said.

"You hate to say, 'You can't swim, Susie, because we don't have a slot for you,'" Savage said.

Swimming used to be a four-year sport, just in high school, he added. "Now, kids see Michael Phelps and they realize, you can make a living with it."

The costs

Local districts are spending \$4 million to \$5 million for each new pool, as part of larger capital projects. Officials in most districts said state aid and reserve funds pay for the construction, which they said lessens the impact on taxpayers. Taxes did rise for Gates Chili district residents, who approved a \$56 million capital project in 2005. The owner of a home assessed at \$100,000 wound up paying an extra \$56 per year for the overall project, said Michael Mamo, Gates Chili's assistant superintendent for business. The rest came from a reserve fund and state aid.

Robert B. Ward, an advocate for fiscal responsibility among schools, said districts should be especially cautious with big-ticket items right now, because of the current turmoil on Wall Street, and its impact on state revenue, and the economy in general.

Ward, director of fiscal studies at the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government in Albany and an adviser to the state Commission on Property Tax Relief, said he did not have specific information about the local projects and could only speak generally about the economic climate.

“It’s hard to guarantee today that there will never be any reduction in state aid for capital projects,” Ward said. “It’s not inconceivable, considering the very serious fiscal problems the state is facing and the likelihood that things will get worse. ... Generally, it’s fair to say that this is the time for municipalities and schools to be cautious.”

Sometimes building new is less expensive than continuing to patch up, school officials said.

John Abbott, East Irondequoit’s assistant superintendent for business, said that was the case with the district’s 50-year-old pool. East Irondequoit is proposing a \$66 million capital project — the largest in district history — which would include a pool as well as a new gymnasium, locker rooms and a bus garage.

State aid will fund about \$53 million, and the district will use all of the \$13 million in a capital reserve fund to cover the remainder of the cost, he said. School board members have not yet set a date for a public vote on the project, which would start in June 2010 if approved.

A burst pipe under the district’s pool flooded a pump room a few years ago, causing wiring to short out, Abbott said. Students can’t dive in the pool, because it’s shallower than the current mandate, a minimum depth of 12 feet.

“We’ve known for some time about programmatic issues,” Abbott said. “You can renovate, but you’ve got a 50-year-old pool that’s not going to last much longer. I don’t think there’s any scenario where you can just ignore it.”

Savage, of Canandaigua Academy, said taxpayers have asked him why his school even needs a pool, since the city sits on the banks of Canandaigua Lake.

Savage said that should be even more of an incentive, for safety reasons. “You need the pool *because* of the lake,” he said. “Swimming is a lifetime sport. If you can save one life from what people learn in school about swimming, it’s worth it.”

The accoutrements

The new pools are wider, with more swimming lanes, and deeper, to address safety concerns for divers. Machines, rather than people, monitor the water quality and add chlorine accordingly. Spencerport’s pool even has a sonar system that sets off alarms if someone is in the pool when it’s closed, said Superintendent Bonnie Seaburn.

Spencerport’s pool is L-shaped, with divers using one area and swimmers another. The former pool, which was 38 years old, was rectangular.

“When students were diving before, we had to reduce the swimming lanes,” she said. “Now, it’s very safe, and we can still get the swimming in at the same time.”

Brockport and Pittsford Mendon also have L-shaped pools that were built a few years ago, Savage said.

Swimming pools are expensive, acknowledged Charles Dean of Greece, the Section V boys swimming coordinator. But so are new football fields, which he said might not be as important in the long run.

“Are there advantages to having a swimming pool in the community? Yes, there are, if not only for the safety factor,” said Dean, who used to coach swimming in the City School District.

“Swimming is the only sport every person should learn, just to stay safe in water. People drown because they don’t know how to swim.”