

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Inter-Office Communication

Date: August 15, 2025
To: Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors
From: Guy Smith, Executive Director for Milwaukee County Parks
Subject: Milwaukee County Parks Aquatics Study
File Type: Action

REQUEST

Authorization to adopt the 2025 Milwaukee County Parks Aquatics Study as an addendum to the Parks 2050 Long-Range Plan.

POLICY

State grant eligibility is dependent on application(s) consistency with local planning.

Wisconsin State Statutes:	NR 51.904(4)
Milwaukee County Code of General Ordinances:	
Specific Adopted Budget:	
Specific Adopted Budget Amendment:	
Specific Adopted Capital Project:	

BACKGROUND

Milwaukee County’s last aquatics study was conducted in 2002, and since that time the Parks Department has experienced changes not only in aquatics infrastructure and staffing, but also in adopted planning documents. In an effort to sustainably and effectively plan for Parks’ future as an aquatics service provider, project WP0724 Milwaukee County Parks Aquatics Study was initiated through file #20-186. The study scope was to define a sustainable path forward for the aquatic amenities provided by Milwaukee County Parks over a projected 20-year timeframe.

The Milwaukee County aquatics system¹ is comprised of:

- 2 indoor deep-well pools,
- 3 outdoor aquatic parks,
- 8 outdoor pools,
- 1 privately operated outdoor pool,
- 7 splashpads,
- 25 wading pools.

¹ For the purposes of this study, beaches and river sites were not evaluated as managed aquatic sites.

Scope elements of the project include:

- Definition of Milwaukee County's primary role as a seasonal, recreational aquatics provider,
- Evaluation of attendance trends over the past 10+ years,
- Consideration of comparable municipal aquatic systems,
- Synthesis of existing aquatic facility conditions and determination of their estimated remaining useful life,
- Maintenance costs, both short- and long-term,
- Projected trends in aquatic recreation,
- Equity disparities, both neighborhood and regional.
- Facility counts, type of service, availability analysis, and service areas for aquatic facilities in Milwaukee County,
- Budgetary evaluations including financial/operating analysis
- Public engagement including an online aquatics survey as well as in-person open house events.

The aquatics study began with a focused analysis phase that included a systemwide inventory, site inspections, building inspections, mechanical system evaluations, and staff interviews. Over the course of several months detailed condition reports were created and used to ascertain the current condition of the aquatic system as a whole, by asset category, and by site.

Evaluation of Milwaukee County's large system of aquatics resulted in identification of several clear themes and concerns: aging infrastructure, lifeguard staffing challenges and safety concerns, varying facility utilization, and community priorities. The pools in the parks system are aged, with the newest pool having been constructed over 16 years ago. The indoor pools have an approximate age of 50 years old, and the waders and deep well pools typically range between 60-90 years old. Attendance trends show that people are attending the same popular pools most frequently, and some small wading pool sites experience less than 25 visitors per day. While different aquatic sites meet different swimming needs, utilization and cost recovery is a factor in long-range planning for the system.

The highest distribution of existing aquatic sites in the system is found in the central region of the County, which is also where population density tends to be the highest. Many of the Parks System's highest equity need sites also fall within this range, aligning with the goal of Milwaukee County as an affordable service provider for recreational aquatics.

The average cost recovery across the aquatic system was found to be approximately 29%. It should be noted that splashpads and wading pools are free sites, while deep well pools, waterparks, and indoor pools charge nominal fees. Through the 2023 public engagement survey it was noted that the public has an overall positive perception of fees and would be open to fee increases if reinvestment was made into aquatics.

The planning study did also note that other service providers are within both Milwaukee County as well as neighboring counties. These alternatives were found to provide service area coverage over Milwaukee County, specifically in areas in the north and south regions where there were less facilities run by Milwaukee County Parks. Additionally, other agencies including school districts are in various stages of fundraising and construction for new community pools within Milwaukee County, notably the Oak Creek – Franklin Joint School District, the Village of Fox Point, and Mke Rec.

Most respondents to the 2023 survey reported that they reached Milwaukee County aquatic sites through use of their personal vehicle, with a smaller percentage walking. Those that did not use Milwaukee County sites reported that the facility they would use was not open, or that they did not have any barriers and simply did not choose to use Milwaukee County Parks aquatics sites. Some reported that they did not know much about Milwaukee County Parks aquatics or used alternative sites.

Consideration was given to trends in aquatic recreation, and the way that Milwaukee County Parks' current system compares to these trends. Across the nation, wading pools are being phased out due to chemical needs, low use patterns, and staffing requirements. In lieu of these types of sites, many communities are electing to shift to more efficient and versatile aquatic amenities. New projects being seen in aquatics include indoor/outdoor mega recreation centers with indoor competition and wellness pools, as well as large seasonal outdoor family aquatic center with varied amenities including lap lanes, waterslides, lazy rivers, and play structures. There is also an increasing trend in developing large destination splashpads that include not only typical sprayers and toys, but also runout slides that offer more excitement for a range of ages, and longer stays at the site. Such splashpads do not have the same staffing/lifeguarding needs as a standard deep well pool, and some charge small fees for entry.

Categorical recommendations for Milwaukee County Parks aquatics included:

Waterparks – Reinvestment in existing waterparks including Cool Waters (Greenfield Park), Schulz Aquatic (Lincoln Park), and Pelican Cove (Kosciuszko Park).

Deep Well Pools – Reinvest in facilities with high utilization trends, close facilities with overlapping service areas and/or low attendance, or transfer to private operator(s).

Wading Pools – Phase out wading pools and identify budget thresholds for maintenance investments. Consider conversion to splashpads for popular sites to meet user needs for heat relief and recreation in a more sustainable and staffing-efficient solution.

Splashpads – Reinvestment in existing splashpads and diversify into new splashpad types including large destination splashpads and small spraygrounds at playground sites for higher operational efficiency and lower capital obligations.

Indoor Pools – Maintain existing sites and increase marketing and programming

to the extent that staffing allows. Evaluate service area needs if other agencies introduce new similar facilities in adjacent neighborhoods.

Milwaukee County Parks plans to follow these recommendations and use them as advisory planning decisions that will guide capital requests, capital outlay documents, operating budgets, and identification of grants and other outside project opportunities for new investments within the aquatic system. Each related budget request or resulting project will include additional approvals, public input opportunities, and phased timelines based on the needs and obligations of Milwaukee County Parks.

Related File No's:	24-651, 20-186, 21-1043
Associated File No's (Including Transfer Packets):	22-604, 21-792, 21-792C, 21-920
Previous Action Date(s):	

ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN

Describe how the item aligns to the objectives in the [strategic plan](#):

- 2A: Determine what, where, and how we deliver services to advance health equity
- 2C: Apply a racial equity lens to all decisions
- 3B: Enhance the County's fiscal health and sustainability
- 3C: Dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities

FISCAL EFFECT

This request has no fiscal impact. Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District has agreed to provide funding for the study from the designated funding for the repair or replacement of the pool facility in Jackson Park outlined in the agreement approved in File #20-186. The recommendations in this planning document will be executed through future capital budget initiatives.

TERMS

NA

VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES

George Denies, Counsilman-Hunsaker & Associates georgedeines@chh2o.com
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PREPARED BY:

Sarah Toomsen, Director of Planning, Milwaukee County Parks

APPROVED BY:

Guy Smith, Executive Director Milwaukee County Parks *Guy D. Smith*

ATTACHMENTS:

- Resolution
- Fiscal Note
- PPT Presentation

Milwaukee County Parks Aquatics Study Report

CC: David Crowley, County Executive
Mary Jo Meyers, Chief of Staff, County Executive's Office
Sheldon Wasserman, Committee on Parks & Culture Chairperson
Steve Taylor, Committee on Parks & Culture Vice Chairperson
Priscilla Coggs-Jones, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Jack Eckblad, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Felesia Martin, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Juan Miguel Martinez, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Anne O'Connor, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors
Janelle M. Jensen, Legislative Services Division Mgr, Office of the County Clerk
Aaron Hertzberg, Director, Department of Administrative Services
Joseph Lamers, Fiscal & Budget Director, DAS
Vince Masterson, Fiscal & Strategic Asset Coordinator, DAS
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Sandy Saltzstein, Research and Policy Analyst