

July 2, 2018

Re: Crystal Pool and Wellness Centre Project

Dear Councilor Alto, Councilor Collins, Councilor Dubow, Mayor Helps, Councilor Isitt, Councilor Loveday, Councilor Potts, Councilor Thornton-Joe and Councilor Young:

6 months have passed since you made the decision to explore different sites for the construction of the new Wellness Centre.

During that time, a number of important points have been brought forward. I understand that staff, under the direction of Mr. Soulliere, have now been instructed to explore the scope and goals of the project. I also understand that the purpose of this research is to ensure that the project aligns with the city's current priorities.

I believe that over the past months, a number of key points about this project have been lost. I ask you to please consider the following in your ongoing decisions about the facility.

Affordability and Equity

There appears to be a belief that the facility's current users are mainly among Victoria's elite.

Anyone holding this view has clearly not spent time in the facility: the current Wellness Centre mainly serves Victoria's underprivileged residents.

Further evidence shows that the majority of users are recreational users¹. Additionally, 26% of L.I.F.E. pass holders in the CRD consider Crystal Pool to be their primary fitness facility². The majority of these users report that they would be unable to access other recreational facilities in the absence of Crystal Pool. What is more, other regional facilities do not currently have the capacity to absorb the 400,000 annual visits that Crystal Pool currently receives.

To note, as Saanich Commonwealth Place gives priority bookings to high-performance athletes, the vast majority of elite athletes train there, not at Crystal Pool.

Moreover, the current facility is home to the Special Olympics swim team: for many of these people with disabilities, swim practice is their only opportunity to socialize and enjoy recreation.

Affordability goes beyond housing: it also extends to affordable access to recreation for everyone. Multiple studies have shown that access to recreation reduces obesity levels, protects against mental illness, decreases depression and anxiety, and contributes to healthier communities. These benefits should be extended to the most vulnerable in our community.

¹ Crystal Pool and Fitness Centre Feasibility Study

² L.I.F.E. Review 2019

If Council is committed to affordability and equity, constructing the new Wellness Centre as quickly as possible would help to support Victoria's most vulnerable citizens.

Good Governance and Civic Engagement

Between 2016 and 2017, 4400 of Victoria's citizens took part in an engagement process to determine the goals of the new Wellness Centre project. Members of the North Park community were a part of those discussions, as were pool users, community groups and advocates for people with disabilities. 80% of survey respondents replied in favour of the current facility design.

The understanding from these people was that the construction of the facility was moving forward as of Fall 2018, pending funding approval. Instead, it appears that Council may be requesting that this process start again from the beginning. **This has led to feelings of distrust from members of the community.**

I believe that attempting to start the engagement process from scratch is disrespectful to the 4400 people who gave of their time to assist the first time around. It is unlikely that citizens will be willing to give of their time once again: the community is becoming fatigued with the delays.

7 years ago, an assessment of Crystal Pool and Fitness Centre showed that the facility was nearing the end of its useful life.

Further, the 2015 Stantec Report highlighted that **the current facility is at high risk of system failure on an unpredictable timeline.** Should the current facility suddenly fail, with no plan in place for replacement, Council will be faced with an unpalatable situation, with no easy or fast solution.

For every month this project is delayed:

- The cost of the project increases by \$400,000.
- The cost of band-aiding the current facility to keep the doors open is \$108,000.
- The cost of subsidizing the current facility is \$17,000 more than it would to subsidize the new facility.

I want to highlight that delaying this project by 2 years increases the cost to taxpayers by at least \$12.6 million.

If Council is committed to Good Governance and Civic Engagement, promising to move forward with the original design of the Wellness Centre is worth reconsidering.

Climate Leadership and Environmental Stewardship

As it currently stands, Crystal Pool and Fitness Centre is not an environmentally-friendly facility. The Canadian median average swimming pool building is established to be **51% more energy efficient** than the existing facility³.

Additionally, the original design not only retains multi-use greenspace for park users during construction, but also reflects the need for no net loss of green space that Council has mandated.

If the City of Victoria is committed to environmental stewardship, constructing the new Wellness Centre as quickly as possible would reduce emissions and show Climate Leadership.

Prosperity and Economic Inclusion

North Park is home to some of Victoria's most at-risk citizens. It has the highest percentage of rental tenure (77%), well above the city average of 59%. Of all neighbourhoods in Victoria, it has one of the lowest percentages of the population above 15 years old holding a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree (55%) and the highest percentage of lone-parent family structures at 28% compared to the city average of 19%⁴.

If Council is committed to inclusion, having a modern Wellness Centre available in this neighbourhood extends opportunities to some of Victoria's most underprivileged people.

Health, Well-Being and a Welcoming City

The following is an excerpt from the Crystal Pool and Fitness Centre Feasibility Study:

Although public aquatic facilities are among the most expensive facilities that a community can provide, almost all communities invest heavily in them because of the tremendous benefits that accrue from their use. These benefits contribute to healthy, active individuals and communities and include:

- Learning and improving skills in swimming, diving and other water sports;
- Rehabilitation and therapy services to those with disabilities, injury or frailty;
- Social opportunities in water or on deck that connect people and reduce feelings of isolation;
- Family opportunities to come together in a recreational setting conducive to all family members;
- Mixing segments and subsets of the community with an activity that is worldwide, appeals to people of all ages and abilities.

³ Crystal Pool and Fitness Centre Feasibility Study

⁴ Crystal Pool and Fitness Centre Feasibility Study

At present, drowning is the second leading cause of death for children under the age of 10⁵. The World Health Organization recommends that all school-aged children be taught to swim in order to provide “lifelong immunization against drowning.”

This summer alone, 800 local children will take part in programs at the facility. Without Crystal Pool and Fitness Centre, these children would not have this opportunity.

If Council is committed to the health and well-being of its citizens, providing a larger and more up-to-date wellness facility is an excellent way to achieve that goal.

I urge the Mayor and Council to remember that this facility serves to improve to the health and well-being of our city’s most vulnerable people. That more than 4400 people have been consulted, and 80% of residents approve of the original plan.

Thousands of staff hours and millions of dollars been invested in designing an outstanding facility that meets the needs of Victorians. The original design of the Wellness Centre provides a welcoming and inclusive facility that will improve the lives of so many in this community, in particular some of its most disadvantaged members.

Mayor Helps has stated publicly that construction of a new Wellness Centre is among the most important work that you can do for Victoria during your term on Council.

Time is running out. I ask you to please make construction of the new Wellness Centre a priority for the City of Victoria, and move forward with the original design. Let’s get this done.

Sincerely,

Karmen McNamara
Victoria, BC

⁵ World Health Organization