



Department Source: Parks and Recreation

To: City Council

From: City Manager & Staff

Council Meeting Date: June 7, 2021

Re: Lifeguard shortage and Impact to Aquatic Facilities

Executive Summary

The Columbia Parks and Recreation Department must adjust the opening schedule for aquatic facilities this summer due to a drastic reduction in the number of applicants for lifeguards. The department needs a minimum of 70 lifeguards and as of May 21, have 46 on payroll. Therefore, the Albert-Oakland Family Aquatic Center opening is delayed to June 9 and will be closed on Mondays and Tuesdays. Pending successful lifeguard classes in June, Douglass Pool would open July 1. Lake of the Woods Pool will be closed for the summer. Little Mates Cove at Twin Lakes was already closed due to infrastructure repairs and operating budget reductions. All spraygrounds and Stephens Lake Beach opened May 28 providing free aquatic opportunities. This includes spraygrounds at Douglass Park, Flat Branch Park and Stephens Lake Park.

Discussion

With the current number of lifeguards, the following aquatic facilities will be open for the 2021 summer season:

1. ARC Water Zone and Hickman will continue to operate as normal.
2. The free spraygrounds at Douglass Park, Flat Branch Park and Stephens Lake Park opened May 28 and will close after the Labor Day weekend on Sept. 6.
3. The Stephens Lake swimming area and beach opened May 28 and will close Sept. 6. It is free to the public.
4. Albert-Oakland Family Aquatic Center: Delayed opening from Memorial Day weekend to June 9. Instead of closing one day per week as in 2020, the facility will be closed two days per week on Mondays and Tuesdays. These days traditionally have the lowest participation rates. The facility's hours will be held in sessions, from 12-2 pm and 2:30-4:30 pm, the same as in summer 2020.
5. Douglass Pool: Aquatic staff will continue to offer lifeguard classes through June with the goal of getting enough lifeguards to open Douglass Pool by the first of July. If we do not have adequate participation in the lifeguard classes, this facility may not open. However, the goal is to keep offering classes until staffing levels allow us to open Douglass.
6. Lake of the Woods Pool. This facility will not open in 2021.
7. Little Mates Cove at Twin Lakes Recreation Area. This facility was previously closed due to required infrastructure repairs and reduced operating budget. The next source of funding to renovate this facility will be 2021 Park Sales Tax ballot extension.

If more applicants are hired and trained, staff will open pools and expand hours as appropriate.



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P&R staff considered the option of opening Douglass Pool instead of Hickman, but several factors that directed us back to Hickman. First, it's the City's only climate-controlled, indoor facility that has deep water for lifeguard training. Without Hickman there wouldn't be any lifeguard training sessions, thus adding to the lifeguard shortage. The Columbia Public Schools utilizes Hickman for their summer swim programs during the day and pays the City for access. In the late afternoon and evenings, Hickman hosts the Parks and Recreation swim lesson programs. All sessions for June are already sold out with a waiting list. Hickman is closed on the weekend and those four lifeguards assist with the ARC and Albert-Oakland Family Aquatic Center. The department's goal is to open Douglass on July 1 or earlier if applicants are found.

As indicated in the summary, Columbia is facing a record low number of lifeguards. To fully staff all of our facilities, an ideal number of lifeguards is in the 120-150 range. However as noted below, P&R has only been able to hire 90 or more guards in two of the last 8 years:

2014 – 90 guards

2015 – 87 guards

2016 – 84 guards

2017 – 93 guards

2018 - 82 guards

2019 - 85 guards

2020 - 78 guards – Hickman, Little Mates Cove and Lake of the Woods were closed.

2021 - 46 guards as of May 21, 2021.

In 2020, the department was one of the few in the state that was able to open public outdoor pools—specifically Albert-Oakland Family Aquatic Center and Douglass Family Aquatic Center—during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite staffing issues. However, those staffing issues have continued and worsened into 2021.

Unfortunately, this is not an issue that impacts only Columbia. There is a shortage of lifeguards nationwide. Reports from media outlets such as [USA Today](#), [NPR](#), [Boston Globe](#), [St. Joe News-Press](#), and [Indy Star](#) report the same problems.

Consensus from a series of national virtual meetings of aquatic professionals indicate that there have been a dwindling number of 15-18 year olds seeking employment, especially for positions that requires special training and certification. In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic closed many facilities, pools across the country were already finding difficulty staffing their facilities. With many pools closed in 2020, the lack of returning guards is an issue.

The American Lifeguard Association reports the following reasons for guard shortages:

- Lifeguard training and certification programs are backlogged because the pandemic closed many pools resulting in class cancellations. Plus certification programs, such as American Red Cross, costs up to \$275 for participants. Columbia's StarGuard program costs \$135.
- Travel restrictions have limited the number of seasonal college and foreign exchange students.



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- Older lifeguards and swimming instructors are retiring early.
- Overall interest is declining.

Aquatic staff members have worked at recruiting applicants through a variety of means. One recruitment tool is to reimburse all lifeguard training expenses if the guard works for Parks and Recreation. To help promote classes, employment fliers are distributed to local high schools, colleges and throughout the community, highlighting the free training. Aquatic staff worked with transit staff to allow posting fliers on city buses. Aquatic staff helps recruitment by word-of-mouth and posting fliers around the community as they have the ability to earn a referral incentive if they recruit a staff member. Social media postings are another valuable recruiting tool.

Aquatic full-time staff is involved in several national and state associations and this communication network allows them to share information on guard needs. For example, a St. Louis or Kansas City suburb department will notify Columbia aquatic staff that one of their lifeguards are coming to the University of Missouri. Columbia staff will then reach out to that individual to determine their employment interest.

Lifeguard hourly pay has increased from \$7.85 in 2018 to \$10.30 in 2021, but it is still difficult to compete with food service and other positions that do not require certification.

Lifeguard positions were posted to the City's Human Resource application site on February 1. All applicants are immediately contacted with lifeguard training information. In 2021, lifeguard classes began in March and the department has held at least one to two StarGuard lifeguard classes per month. In an effort to continue to certify more guards, two more lifeguard classes will be offered in June which is a first for the Department.

The Aquatic Supervisor has worked with StarGuard to minimize positions that require certification. For example, the person managing the top of a water slide is not required to be a certified lifeguard.

However, public safety is the number one priority. To ensure the safest environment at Columbia's aquatic facilities, the department requires that lifeguards hold one of the most rigorous certifications in the industry. Although the temptation exists to open facilities with less than the required number guards, the department would never compromise the safety of the public. Staff hopes that as schools return to normal, staff will be able to attend and conduct in-person, on-site recruitment through job fairs.

This report is informational only and no council action is required.

Fiscal Impact

Short-Term Impact: NA

Long-Term Impact: NA

Strategic & Comprehensive Plan Impact



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Strategic Plan Impacts:

Primary Impact: Public Safety, Secondary Impact: Not Applicable, Tertiary Impact: Not Applicable

Comprehensive Plan Impacts:

Primary Impact: Not Applicable, Secondary Impact: Not applicable, Tertiary Impact: Not Applicable

Legislative History

Date	Action
NA	NA

Suggested Council Action

This report is informational only.