

Mountain Home Aquatic Center Q & A

Interviews with Western Elmore County Recreation District Board of Directors: Dan Gillies, Lee Pierce, Cassandra Nordon, and District Administrator, Michelle Heins

By Diana Hooley

What's happening with the Aquatic Center now?

“The building is up and the two pools (a lap pool and a recreation pool) are dug and cemented,” said Dan Gillies. Gillies added plans also include two multi-purpose rooms for community use, but a lot has been accomplished since ground was first broke a few years ago. Initially, sidewalks were put in and the parking lot paved since material costs for these features were likely to increase. Then underground pipes for the pool were installed, as well as electrical wiring and a gas line.

Cassandra Nordin said the recreation district is now ready to pour concrete on the floor around the pool and lay down tile, but funding for two HVAC systems is still needed. She said the HVAC systems are especially important because they circulate air in the pool area and keep the humidity, mold, and mildew down.

Gillies commented that the pool area will experience some natural ventilation when large garage doors along the side of the building are raised. He said another nice feature of the building design is in the ceiling. “A large panel in the center of the ceiling lets outside light come through.”

Construction on the aquatic center will continue through the winter, said Gillies, as funds allow. The plan now is to have an open house and walk-through for the community in the spring.

Why has it taken so many years to build the Aquatic Center?

“The Recreation District began taxing property in 2001,” said Lee Pierce. “But, the first ten years (incoming money) was very low. Since we are a taxing district, we’re not legally allowed to take out a lien to speed the project up.” Michelle Heins noted the first year the district only garnered about \$10,000 toward this multi-million dollar project.

Dan Gillies cited the pandemic and inflation as another factor in delaying the building of the Aquatic Center. “Since we broke ground the construction costs have climbed from about \$7 million to now approximately \$10.5 million.”

All the board members acknowledged that money and momentum were lost in 2016 when a board was elected who chose to divert funds away from the construction of the facility. Gillies said the recreation district was saddled with big penalties for canceled contracts. “After this board was recalled,” Pierce said, “it took us nine months to stop the bleeding (from fines and legal fees) and restart the project again.”

How will the Aquatic Center benefit me?

“Adults and school swim teams will like the six-lane lap pool,” said Michelle Heins. Heins added that though Mountain Home Air Force Base has a lap pool it isn’t always open and getting on the base can be difficult for non-military.

Lee Pierce said the Aquatic Center’s second pool, the recreation pool, will become a great entertainment option for community kids and young people. “Our kids have limited choices since the movie theatre, bowling alley, and youth center closed.” A giant water slide will be located at the south end of the rec pool and a “lazy river” in the general use area.

With the recreation pool’s easy entry, Dan Gillies said seniors and small children will have little problem getting into the water. Gillies also noted equipment will be installed to help people with disabilities enter the pool. “The deepest part of the rec pool will only be 4-5 feet deep and the water will be warm,” said Gillies. “It’ll be a good pool for water aerobics classes and people needing physical therapy.”

Cassandra Nordin said another benefit of the Aquatic Center is community swim classes. She mentioned Idaho’s high rate of drownings (Idaho ranks 9th in the U.S. for deaths by drowning). “I have five children,” said Nordin, “and would love for them to have a place to take swim lessons.” Nordin is a BSA scoutmaster and wants a local pool where her scouts can pass their swim tests to qualify for Eagle rank. Gillies remarked that before the pandemic Caldwell school district required all third-graders to take swimming lessons (at the local YMCA). He’d like to see something like that happen here in Mountain Home.

Michelle Heins also emphasized how facilities like the Aquatic Center can increase economic development and attract businesses to our community. A similar recreation facility was recently built in the small town of Osage, Iowa and was cited as one of the important reasons Valent BioSciences Corporation with its 150 highly skilled employees moved to Osage.

Will it cost much to use the facility?

“The Aquatic Center is not a private entity and will be built and sustained largely by property taxes,” said Michelle Heins. Boise’s downtown YMCA charges about \$700 a year membership fee for adults, but there will be no membership fees for Mountain Home’s Aquatic Center. Heins said people will be charged a modest daily use fee or can buy passes for multiple use.

When will the Aquatic Center be finished?

Dan Gillies said the facility could be finished anywhere from two to four years using just property tax monies and without any additional grants or donations. Lee Pierce said, “The plan is to finish the interior of the building and continue with construction as funds allow. We should be able to open the lap pool in two years—but none of us want to wait that long.”

How can I help? Can I donate to the Aquatic Center project?

The district needs about \$2-3 million to finish the Aquatic Center, according to Michelle Heins. She said the next big purchasing hurdle is the HVAC units which cost about \$750,000.

As a 501 (c-3) charitable organization, donations to the Aquatic Center can potentially be tax deductible. Persons interested in making a donation should contact Betty Ashcraft, chair of the Aquatic Center Foundation Board, at 208-866-6263 or email: bsashcraft18@gmail.com