

Eastglen Leisure Centre Community Conversations

What We Heard Report

September 2015



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Context

In 2014 attendance at the Eastglen Pool was slightly fewer than 50,000 visits, a figure that has declined over the past 10 years. This level of attendance is far below the levels of comparable facilities, which include Hardisty, Bonnie Doon, Confederation and Jasper Place Leisure Centres. These other facilities have each seen attendance well above 100,000 visits per year for the past decade.

As the Eastglen Pool is still in very good physical condition, the City of Edmonton is exploring ways to increase the use of the facility, making it a vibrant place for the community and ensuring its sustainable operation long into the future.

To aid in its decision-making, the City of Edmonton engaged with stakeholders, pool users and community members about the pool's future in July 2015. The consultation had three main objectives:

1. To understand the role the Eastglen Pool plays in local quality of life
2. To understand the needs of the Eastglen Community, facility customers, and stakeholders
3. To find collaborative solutions to optimize the use of Eastglen Pool.

Earlier in the year, the City of Edmonton had engaged key stakeholders, including community leagues, about a proposal to rent pool time to Paul Sadler Swimland – a company which specializes in providing swimming lessons to young children.

As details of the Swimland proposal became more widely known, the community expressed significant concerns to the City. In particular, community members were concerned about the proposed water temperature increase, which would have seen the pool temperature raised to 32 degrees from its current 29.5 degrees. They were also concerned about the amount of time being leased to Swimland. Together, participants believed these two aspects of the proposal would preclude all other uses of the Eastglen Pool and prevent current users from accessing the facility.

Given the intensity of feeling around the issue, the City decided to strengthen its public engagement approach.

The Engagement Process

As part of this engagement process, two consultation meetings were held in July 2015. The first meeting was held on July 8th at the Bellevue Community League Hall and was attended by invited Eastglen Pool user groups, pool user representatives and area community leagues. There were 11 people in attendance.

A public meeting was held on July 15th at the Bellevue Community League Hall. The meeting was advertised through direct mail to area residents, roadside signs, through the City of Edmonton's website and social media accounts as well as with a flyer made available at the Eastglen Pool. Approximately 180 people attended the meeting.

Both meetings followed similar formats. A representative from the City of Edmonton provided participants with background information and context on the Eastglen Pool, and participants were then led through a series of discussion questions by a third-party facilitator.

Following the public meeting, an online survey was made available for completion by the general public between July 15 and August 8, 2015. Hard copies of the survey were also made available for completion at the Eastglen Pool. In total, 461 surveys were completed.

Survey Participant Profile:

The survey asked several questions designed to provide a profile of the community and of Eastglen Pool users. These questions included:

What activities do you use Eastglen Pool for? (check all that apply)	Response Percent	Response Count
Aquafit	28.2%	113
Public Swimming	43.6%	175
Community Swim	10.2%	41
Swimming Lessons	10.7%	43
Lane Swimming	40.4%	162
Private Group Rental	6.2%	25
Other (please specify)	19.2%	77

401 respondents provided answers to this question, with public swimming, lane swimming, and aquafit being the three most popular answers.

Survey respondents were also asked how often they currently visit the Eastglen Pool. The 414 people who completed this question answered:

How often do you visit Eastglen Pool?	Response Percent	Response Count
More than once per week	31.6%	131
Once per week	12.6%	52
Several times per month	14.0%	58
Once per month	6.3%	26
Less than once per month	35.5%	147

Notably, more than one third of survey participants currently visit the pool less than once per month.

The average age of survey participants was 46 years, and the median age was 43.

Conversation Questions

1. The Importance of Eastglen Pool

The questions posed in all three consultation streams were designed to solicit information from participants on two main issues. The first question was “*Why is the Eastglen Pool important to the community?*” The feedback received included:

Eastglen is an important local amenity

Repeatedly, consultation participants stressed the importance of the Eastglen Pool as a local amenity. They said the pool’s location within the community, rather than along major thoroughfares, makes it a more attractive and easier to access destination than other recreation centres in the area (Commonwealth, Clareview). Many others noted that its close

proximity to the area's seniors' residences offers older community members an accessible space for low-impact exercise.

As well, several consultation participants suggested the Eastglen Pool is more suitable for lane swimming and swim club rentals than other facilities in the area due to the design of the pool (length, number of lanes, etc).

"It is my neighbourhood pool, I can bike or walk there. I trust my children to walk there on their own. [It] allows them to meet friends and do an activity close to home without a parent driving."

Acts as a social hub

For many of the participants in the consultations, Eastglen Pool is more than just a recreational facility. Many people talked about the value of Eastglen as a social hub for the community. Participants in programs like aquafit frequently gather for social activities after classes have concluded. This provides an important social connection, especially for the area's older residents.

"I have been going to this pool for 20 years for aquafit and lane swimming. The time is convenient, the water temperature is refreshing for me and social gatherings after swimming for coffee and cookies is enjoyable. It's a get together for us seniors."

Saltwater pool

Consultation participants highlighted the Eastglen Pool's saltwater treatment system as a particularly attractive feature. Participants said they find saltwater pools to be less irritating to their skin and hair, and believed that attendance could improve if Eastglen's saltwater status was better known.

"The saltwater is better for my hair and doesn't irritate my skin...My face gets so irritated by chlorine in the winter, that nothing I own works to get rid of the dryness caused by [it]. I have to avoid getting my face wet at other pools. At Eastglen the saltwater actually heals my skin."

2. Recommendations to Improve Attendance

The second part of the consultation conversations was designed to generate ideas and recommendations that could be implemented to increase the use of Eastglen Pool. Consultation participants had a number of ideas they believe could help revitalize the pool, including:

Increased promotion:

Frequently, consultation participants said they believed the Eastglen Pool is not widely promoted, which may be impacting the current low attendance figures. In particular, participants observed that Eastglen may require more promotion than other pools due to its location in the neighbourhood – other pools are more visible simply due to their proximity to major commuter routes.

Specific suggestions for promotion included:

- Highlighting that Eastglen is one of the few saltwater pools in the City.
- Advertising in local publications like the Edmonton Journal.
- Specifically targeting area senior's residences.
- Advertising at local schools.
- Promote the midnight swim, women-only swim times, and other unique programs.

"Find a niche, promote and advertise."

Improved programming

Participants in the consultation also suggested that a more focused approach to programming could help attract and retain users. Several people said the frequently changing pool schedule made it difficult for them to stick to an exercise routine and that this situation potentially drives users away. Several people suggested that niche programming (organized swim clubs, snorkeling or scuba diving, etc) could be offered at Eastglen as a way to attract new users. Many participants suggested that programs should be tailored to the local community. For example, they noted that the current women-only swim time was very popular with the large Muslim population living near the pool. Others suggested leveraging the pool's location next to the local school for potential users. Some participants believed that partnership programs could be developed between the school, the pool and swim clubs.

As well, many participants believe that hiring a full time programmer, rather than sharing programming resources with another pool, could help resolve Eastglen's programming issues.

Specific programming suggestions included:

- Expand the women-only swim.
- Create partnership programs with the local high school.
- Specialize in offering niche programs (scuba, lifesaving training, etc).
- Offer senior's recreation and fitness classes.
- Partner with the Green Shack program.
- Offer programs targeted at low income families and youth at a reduced rate
- Expand the number of aquafit programs offered at Eastglen Pool.

"Perhaps the City could work more with the High School and they could have more swimming programs which would increase the use of the pool."

Improved facilities

Many commenters suggested various capital improvements could be made to Eastglen's facilities to attract users. Some suggestions were fairly small – for example, many participants in the consultations suggested making better use of the outdoor patio during the summer months, including setting up an ice cream stand, deck chairs and umbrellas to allow people to get some sun during public swim times or after aquafit classes.

Other suggestions were larger in scope and ranged from renovating the main floor to be more accessible to people with reduced mobility to building a small room for exercise equipment, to expanding the hot tub and sauna. Some participants suggested that renovation plans may already exist, and could be used as the basis for a facility expansion.

Specific infrastructure suggestions included:

- Improve the use of the outdoor patio by adding deck chairs and a concession.
- Renovate the change rooms to improve accessibility.
- Expand the hot tub and the sauna.
- Renovate the pool to include a small fitness centre.

“If the outdoor patio were better equipped I'd probably be there a lot more in summer. Maybe allow a small coffee/concession to come for summer.”

Improved pool operations

Consultation participants identified several operational issues they believe create barriers to attracting and retaining users to Eastglen Pool. These included general maintenance issues like a prolonged lack of hot water in the showers and heating issues with the sauna, to a shutdown schedule that is perceived as excessively long and disruptive to pool users. Participants said that the long shutdowns drive users to other facilities and they may not return after the pool re-opens.

Specific suggestions on improving pool operations included:

- Shortening the length of shutdowns and coordinate their scheduling with public demand of the facility.
- Ensuring general maintenance issues are addressed in a timely manner.

“...if Eastglen wasn't shut down for months at a stretch for maintenance, users wouldn't be forced to find programs outside the community.”

3. Additional Information from Survey:

After prompting users for specific suggestions on how best to improve the use of the Eastglen Pool, participants were asked “How often would you visit the Eastglen Pool if these programs and services were offered.” The breakdown of the 311 surveys responses received is below:

	Response Percent	Response Count
More than once per week	50.5%	157
Once per week	22.2%	69
Several times per month	16.1%	50
Once per month	4.5%	14
Less than once per month	6.8%	21

The results show a significant increase in the number of people who anticipate using the pool at least once per week; the number of participants who selected “more than once per week”

increased nearly 20 percent, and the number of participants who selected “once per week” increased by 10 percent.

Other Themes:

Several overarching themes emerged from discussions at the two meetings and in the responses to the online survey. These included:

Transparency and process concerns

The most prevalent, as well as the most strongly expressed feedback received throughout the consultation process focused on the issue of transparency and process concerns. Some participants believed that an agreement had already been established with Swimland and that the consultations were being conducted with a pre-determined outcome. Many others felt the City should have consulted with the public much earlier in the decision making process. As well, the information on Eastglen’s attendance numbers was openly questioned by participants - especially during the public meeting.

Based on the conversations with citizens, it was clear that the approach to this initiative has affected the community’s relationship with the City of Edmonton and that further discussions with Swimland are only likely to add to their discontent.

“You have a very strong group of followers. Listen to them. Ask them for input regularly.”

Concerns about the pool temperature

The second most strongly expressed feedback received during the consultation was in regards to the pool’s temperature. Participants in the consultation process were very clear they would not like to see the pool’s temperature increased. They feel that any increase in temperature would reduce the potential uses of the pool. For example, highly aerobic activities like lane swimming and aquafit require pool temperatures that ensure people are able to stay cool. Some citizens said that the pool’s current temperature of 29.5 degrees likely represents the highest at which these activities could be done comfortably.

“You will not be able to continue to run programs with the increased water temperature unless you want an adverse medical event to occur while participants are exercising.”

Concerns with the Swimland proposal

Participants in both meetings and the online survey expressed concerns about the Swimland proposal in addition to the concerns about the pool temperature. Participants were particularly troubled with the proposed number of hours being leased to Swimland and felt this, when combined with the increased temperature, would exclude all other uses of the Eastglen Pool.

Many other participants expressed concerns about the cost of the Swimland lessons, which they said cost three times more than the City of Edmonton lessons currently offered at the facility. They pointed out that the area around the Eastglen Pool is not as wealthy as Riverbend, where Swimland currently operates, and believe some local residents would not be able to afford to register their children.

“It would be a shame for a City facility that my taxes and my pass fees go to paying for, would then be inaccessible to many of the patrons in the neighborhood.”

Endorsement of the Swimland proposal

Some participants (approximately 10%), predominately in the online survey, expressed support for the Swimland program beyond its current Riverbend facility. However, a number of these comments were unclear if the respondents were advocating for Swimland programming specifically at Eastglen, or simply for more Swimland programming to be available in the city.

“I would love Paul Sadler Swimland to come to Eastglen as it is a great program and closer to our house.”

Conclusion and Next Steps

Eastglen Pool is clearly an important facility to the surrounding community and most of the consultation participants expressed that they are willing to work to find collaborative solutions to improve attendance at the pool. However, the message was clearly heard that these solutions must include and maintain public access to the facility. Furthermore, these consultations have made clear the tension that currently exists between the City and the Eastglen community and that work will be required to re-build the relationship.

Community members, stakeholders and pool users will be invited to a second conversation designed to discuss and share ideas about re-invigorating Eastglen Pool. The City will use these shortlisted ideas as they plan the next steps in the Eastglen revitalization process. More details on this consultation will become available in the coming weeks.