

# GET OFF THE FENCE

## SUCCESS STORIES

### COULD BE THE IMPETUS

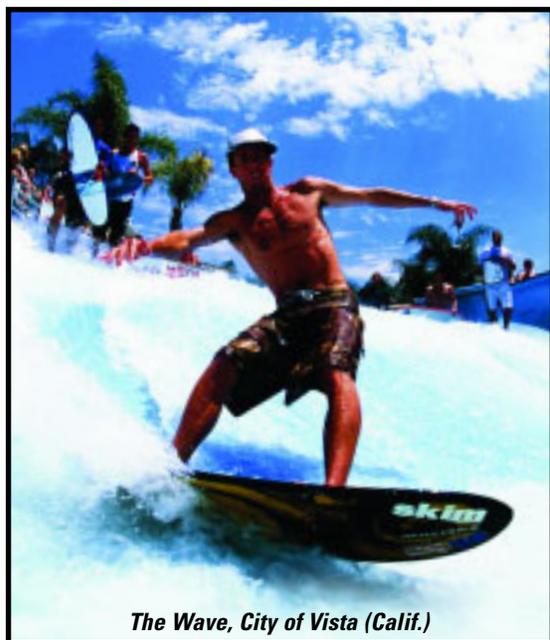
### YOUR PARKS DEPARTMENT NEEDS

### TO CLIMB OFF THE FENCE

### AND DEVELOP A WATERPARK



*Hunt Club Park Aquatic Center, Gurnee (Ill.)*



*The Wave, City of Vista (Calif.)*

Collinsville, Ill., has always had its special claim to fame: It is known by many as the horseradish capital of the world. Building on this gastronomic title, the area also is recognized as having the world's largest ketchup bottle. But such acclaim is less important to the area's local residents than a special attraction they truly enjoy: Splash City Family Waterpark.

Even so, despite the park's success today—with improvements and special events being added every year to continue attracting increasing numbers of both residents and nonresidents—the city that owns and developed the park is like many that have looked for ways to meet citizens' aquatic needs while facing budget constraints. Knowing the problems it faced, the Collinsville Area Recreation District was unsure whether the creation of a waterpark was a smart move. After all, the city was operating under the fiscal restraints of Illinois' tax cap. Could it afford a waterpark? How would it pay for one? The answer, park staff realized, once it had looked at area interest and funding options, became virtually a no-brainer. A waterpark would solve multiple problems for their area.

Many parks and recreation districts face similar questions. Those "on the fence" regarding this issue should consider how they would answer the following questions:

- Has attendance at your current aquatic facilities been dropping off in recent years?
- Have repair costs to your current aquatic facilities been increasing?
- Do residents complain about a lack of facilities to meet their needs, such as competitive swimming pools or family-oriented aquatic areas?

The Wilmette Park District outside Evanston, Ill., faced such questions. Park staffers saw enthusiasm for its pool complex drying up as the pool got older and older. Annual maintenance on the 1972-era facilities—which were state-of-the-art when constructed—had become a nightmare. Plus, the lack of recreational amenities was sending patrons out the door to neighboring waterpark facilities.

Even so, parks staff worried whether the city should pursue the development of a waterpark. Questions about which they wondered included:

- **Short summer seasons.** With only a limited number of days of summer, would a waterpark be worth the investment?
- **Funding.** How would they pay for a waterpark? Could the parks district be sure it would win public approval for funding?
- **Increased fees.** Would residents be willing to pay increased fees over those to which they'd become accustomed for traditional swimming pools?

The answers—more often than not—are yes, yes, yes and yes. Consider these successful examples:

■ **Wilmette's winner.** Wilmette, like other parks districts across the country, discovered that none of these questions was insurmountable in making the decision to build a waterpark in their city. Though Wilmette has only an 80-day season, after a meticulous campaign aimed at educating the public about the condition of its pool and its life expectancy, as well as the solicitation of input from user groups, voters approved a referendum in all 36 precincts of the city. The waterpark has been a phenomenal success.

■ **Charleston's triumph.** Similarly, the Charleston County (S.C.) Parks and Recreation Commission wondered if its residents would support an increase in admission fees from \$1 to more than \$4 when it converted an



*RiverWinds Community Center, West Deptford Township (N.J.)*



*The Splash at Fossil Trace, City of Golden (Colo.)*

old-fashioned “swimming hole” into a modern water playground. Once residents had a chance to discover what the new facility offered, however, attendance increased by 450 percent from 14,000 a year to 63,000 a year.

■ **Red Oaks’ achievement.** The Oakland County (Mich.) Parks system saw attendance dropping at its aquatics facility, Red Oaks Waterpark—despite the wave pool and giant triple waterslide—due to the lack of new attractions for families and small children since its construction in 1986. Plus, waterpark guests had the perception that fee increases were occurring without new amenities being added. After reviewing public opinion via on-site surveys and comment cards, as well as a county-wide telephone poll, the parks department made improvements, including the addition of a children’s interactive water playground, among other attractions. The first year the park was open with the new features, attendance jumped from an average of 50,000 annual visitors to 68,000. It has averaged 90,000 a season since then.

■ **Hyland Hills’ happiness.** In the mid-’70s, Hyland Hills Parks & Recreation District (Federal Heights, Colo.) realized that the expenses of its parks and recreation facilities and programs were overwhelming the district’s property-tax revenue base. Hyland Hills began to develop plans for an innovative facility that would provide a high-quality recreational experience for the community while subsidizing existing, nonrevenue programs. After much deliberation, the district decided to build a family water theme park: Water World. After 25 successful years, Water World has become the “big brother” to many of Hyland Hills’ other community programs. Parks and recreation district leadership has been able to use the money generated by Water World to build additional park amenities, expand park services and purchase equipment for senior citizen programs while providing additional recreation opportunities for the community. Without the subsidy generated by Water World, other programs would not exist or their fees would be much higher.

If your parks department has any hesitation about the potential benefits a waterpark can provide, a consultant or other expert in waterpark development can provide guidance and answer questions. With the right direction, the addition of a waterpark can offer a parks-and-recreation districts’ residents a positive aquatics experience on a variety of levels. [WWA](http://www.waterparks.org)

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## WHERE TO FIND FUNDING

- **The Wave, City of Vista (Calif.):** An economic feasibility study showed the city could use revenue bonds, totaling \$1.5 million, along with other funding sources including \$1.6 million in park fees, \$600,000 in redevelopment revenue and about \$200,000 in waterpark-generated fees. The most important stipulation in approving construction was the facility would not be constructed or maintained using general-fund tax dollars.
- **Hunt Club Park Aquatic Center, Gurnee (Ill.) Park District:** The parks district developed a cooperative funding agreement with the Village of Gurnee. Voters then approved an advisory referendum at a cost to the village “not to exceed \$400,000 annually for a maximum of 20 years.”
- **RiverWinds Community Center, West Deptford Township (N.J.):** West Deptford issued an estimated \$53 million in 30-year bonds to finance the construction of its community center, which included an indoor waterpark. The township is replaying long-term bonds with revenue from the sale and lease of RiverWinds land to private developers. Specialty property-tax agreements generate additional revenue. Federal grants and corporate donations totaling \$2.8 million offset a portion of the total construction costs.
- **The Splash at Fossil Trace, City of Golden (Colo.):** The city presented a bond issue that appealed to the needs of a variety of constituencies and outdoor enthusiasts. The strategy worked, and voters approved a \$28 million bond issue to build the aquatics park, golf course, club house and extension of the public trail system.