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Flagler swimmers push for new pool

By KENYA WOODARD - Staff Writer

PALM COAST—An advocacy group is hoping to make a big enough splash so local leaders will get behind its push for a new public swimming pool.

In just a few months, [Friends of Swimming](#) has set up a Web site and an online petition in hopes of gaining community support for a public pool that can host swimming competitions.

Flagler County, Palm Coast and Flagler County school leaders say they support a new swimming complex but differ on how to finance the project, which some have estimated to cost between \$5 million and \$9 million.

In a telephone interview earlier this week, Judi Rich of Palm Coast said her group wants community leaders to work together and come up with a plan to build a new pool.

About 160 people have signed the petition, she said.

The area's two pools—Frieda Zamba Swimming Pool at Belle Terre Park and Belle Terre Swim and Racquet Club—are outdated and inadequate, Rich and other swimmers say. Both pools are in Palm Coast. The city of Palm Coast operates Frieda Zamba while the racquet club is owned by the Flagler County school district.

Swimmers' frustrations reached a crescendo last month when heavy rains caused drainage problems and flooded the parking lot. That prompted officials to close Frieda Zamba and forced school swim teams and recreational swim groups to find other pools to practice in, Rich said. Some swim groups have not been able to meet since the closing, she said.

Work has been done to repair the pool's drainage problems but it's not clear when the pool will reopen, officials say.

"I think the time is now (to build a new pool)," she said. "We have the growth, and I believe we have enough people to support this project."

Rich said the lack of starting blocks at the Frieda Zamba Swimming Pool puts swimmers at a disadvantage when they compete against other teams. In addition, the space for recreational swimmers has diminished thanks to growing demand for pool access, she said.

The area needs a pool that's 55 yards long and 25 yards wide that can host competition-sanctioned meets, Rich said.

The community could benefit from a new pool, especially people who suffer from illnesses that require aquatic therapy, she said.

Isabella Vasconcellos of Palm Coast, who coaches a synchronized swim team called the Flagler County Belles, said "it's some sort of miracle" that her 33-member team ranks fourth in the nation in the 12-and-under category despite the challenges it faces.

The team splits its practices between the pools at Belle Terre Racquet Club and Daytona Beach Community College's Lemerand Center in Daytona Beach, she said.

The team can practice very few of its techniques at the Belle Terre Racquet Club because its pool is only 5 feet deep, she said.

Renting space at the pools is very expensive for the team, costing each girl about \$150 a month, she said.

A new pool could help local swim groups build a larger fan base and garner more support from the community, Vasconcellos said.

"It's pretty depressing to go around outside of the county and people know who you are, but in the county people don't know who you are," she said.

It's been six years since a community group banded together to push for a new pool.

Sandra Rose Friedman of Palm Coast, who was part of the last campaign, said the group's efforts went nowhere after local leaders told them there was no money.

Building a new pool would not be impossible "if ever there were the money," she said.

"Unless a philanthropist comes through with \$5 million—it's going to be a minimum of that to build it," Friedman said.

Building a new swimming complex may take resources and support beyond what local government can provide, Palm Coast Recreation and Parks director John Jackson said.

"We have to look at all the available funding sources, including grants," he said.

A new swimming complex may be a boon to the community, but the decision to build it shouldn't be left to local leaders, Palm Coast Councilman Alan Peterson said.

"It must be a countywide referendum issue because it is a luxury," Peterson said.

Finding the money for the project by any means will be challenging, Councilwoman Mary DiStefano said.

"(Citizens) want all this stuff, but they don't want to raise taxes," she said. "I don't know where we're going to get the money from."

Flagler County Commissioner George Hanns said the county can't fully shoulder the financial responsibility.

A "three-way deal" among the county, city and School Board is more ideal, he said.

"Everyone looks at the county for money, but we don't have the deep pockets we once had," he said.

Flagler County school Superintendent Bill Delbrugge said the community is a major player in raising the money for the pool.

"It can be a four-way deal—the community, Flagler County, the city of Palm Coast and the school district," he said.

Delbrugge suggested the pool could be built on undeveloped land near the Belle Terre Swim and Racquet Club.

City Council members DiStefano and Jon Netts, however, pointed out the city has looked into reserving land in Town Center near Bulldog Road to build an aquatic center.

Finding a suitable location will also take the cooperation of everyone involved, School Board member Peter Palmer said. "I think our interaction is really important," he said.

School Board member Evie Shellenberger concurred.

"It's something that's very viable to look at and to come up with the best plan," she said.

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What's Next? Friends of Swimming plan to host a meeting at 7 p.m. Nov. 13 at the Palm Coast Community Center, 305 Palm Coast Parkway. For more information, visit www.friendsofswimming.org.

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6 comments from other readers:

1. Salvatore - Palm coast

The pool was not closed due to flooding, the city had a year to plan a new entrance since the school board announced it was closing the only road into the pool to build an addition onto the 2 schools. The FCSB kept the road open till the last possible moment but had to close it due to ongoing construction, the city still had no plan in place. The pool has been closed since Sept 12th and has yet to open, this was just poor planning on the City of Palm Coasts part, someone really dropped the ball and the swim teams are the ones suffering from it.

2. elizabeth - Palm Coast, FL

Why did the town feel that a new tennis facility was more important than a town swimming pool. The pool would be a great advantage to everyone young and old. It could be a place for families to gather during the summer and children to play. Swimming is wonderful exercise for all. I just don't understand where Palm Coast comes up with some of its ideas. Maybe focusing on a family community would make Palm Coast more appealing.

3. The Voice - Palm Coast

Why does the city need to fund these projects at all? Shouldn't they focus on bringing in jobs?

4. Someone - Palm Coast

We have so much talent here in Flagler County with the FPC swim team, Synchro Belles, the masters swimmers. Why can't they just notice that and think of the future of our kids in Flagler County.

5. Long-Time Flagler County Resident - Flagler County

First off, Alan Peterson's comment re: "It must be a countywide referendum issue because it is a luxury," is a misguided statement. As far as an aquatic facility being a luxury - IT IS AN IMPORTANT NECESSITY for the health, safety, and welfare of all Flagler County residents (not just a select few). Also the comment regarding focusing on bringing in jobs is right on the money. A state-of-the-art aquatic facility will bring in numerous jobs - from the facility itself to the need for hotels, restaurants, and bringing in a tremendous amount of revenue to the county from superior National and International athletes and their families and coaches that such a facility will attract. In addition the benefits to our community of safety (every child in Flagler County should have available to them the right to water safety classes); as well as health benefits i.e. rehabilitation and exercise programs especially targeted to the senior population. It is a no-brainer. The county, cities, school board, health institutions, the local college and all other concerned citizens and athletes need to work together to benefit and enhance the entire community. Thanks Friends of Swimming!

6. Judi Rich - Palm Coast, FL

On behalf of Friends of Swimming, I would like to thank Kenya Woodard on writing an outstanding article. Besides the fact of why the Frieda Zamba pool has been closed since mid-September is incorrect (not due to flooding), you did bring our mission out to the public for all to read. Thank you. And I'd also like to thank everyone who has signed the online petition supporting this mission (173 supporters as of tonight). It's a vision worth campaigning for and by offering a wider variety of venues to our community will only help make our county more appealing to those bringing in viable industry and higher paying jobs. We, Friends of Swimming, would like to work hand-in-hand with the City, the County and the School Board to make this dream become a reality! And for the record, it's a 50-meter by a 25-yard pool or a 50-meter by a 25-meter pool in which a bulkhead should be installed to accommodate 25-yard events. Thanks again. Judi Rich President Friends of Swimming