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Amazon Builds Momentum for Nonprofit SPLASHForward

SPLASHForward is pleased to announce that Amazon has donated \$100,000 to the aquatics advocacy nonprofit to support its development costs as they lead the effort to realize a new world class public health and aquatics facility in Bellevue.

“A world class public aquatics center in Bellevue will greatly contribute to making our city the place you want to be. We are a city surrounded by water and learning to swim should be accessible to our community for generations to come. The six recent drowning deaths demonstrate how incredibly important water safety is to everyone. SPLASHForward has been instrumental in shaping the vision and working with the City. Bellevue appreciates Amazon’s support of this critical project. They have been a great partner in making our City better.” Jennifer Robertson, Bellevue City Council Member

SPLASHForward believes aquatics unites us, makes our communities stronger, and that public aquatics facilities improve our health and wellbeing. Our communities are surrounded by beautiful lakes, rivers, and the ocean, where everyone should be able to enjoy them without the risk of drowning. Our local drowning tragedies in recent weeks and the pandemic itself has called attention to the great need for safe public spaces where everyone belongs and aquatics pathways are created so everyone, regardless of age, ability or background has access to learning to swim and opportunities for enjoyment, fitness, therapy, and community connection.

Amazon’s funds strengthen and build momentum for SPLASHForward’s advocacy efforts and early seed funding phase. SPLASHForward’s goal is to raise \$500,000 and Amazon’s donation pushes them past the midway point. They will use a significant portion of Amazon’s funds to assess private funding capacity from a full range of sources that they plan to bring to the capital costs for new public aquatics facility that would be a public private partnership with the City of Bellevue, the Bellevue School District, potential site partners and local stakeholders. Private funding will come from individuals, community organizations, program partners, foundations, grants and both large and small corporate partners.

SPLASHForward has developed several initiatives to raise awareness on the importance and benefits of access to aquatics and water safety. This past April, SPLASHForward initiated a High School Lifeguard Training program to help address the local shortage of lifeguards and to provide high school students the opportunity to not only learn lifesaving skills, but also obtain a job as a lifeguard at our local pools and beaches. The pandemic and recent heat wave has again put the spotlight on our local (and national) lifeguard shortage and on the lack of access to swim lessons. Lifeguards and swim lessons were an issue before the pandemic and are now magnified along with the need for new accessible and affordable public aquatic facilities.

SPLASHForward will use a portion of Amazon’s support to fund their High School Lifeguard Training Program over the next two years as it builds and grows the program to support more high school students. To date it

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has supported ten Bellevue School District high school students in receiving their American Red Cross certification and landing a job for the summer. Amazon's momentum building will help grow the program to additional school districts and with the capacity to train fifty additional high school lifeguards in the next two years. SPLASHForward wants to understand any barriers that would help a student become a lifeguard (e.g. minimum level of swimming skills needed to become a lifeguard) and is working with partner organizations Special Olympics of Washington and Nurturing Water Therapies to envision and create the opportunity for Special Olympic athletes to become lifeguards too.

"I love to swim and wanted to do something to help others that involved swimming. I had taken lifeguard camps and they were interesting so I that made me want to become an actual certified lifeguard." High School Student Lifeguard, Bellevue

And there is indeed momentum. Amazon's gift unlocks a \$40,000 pledge from Pacific Northwest Swimming, USA Swimming's local sports governing body for the Pacific Northwest region. Pacific Northwest Swimming (PNS) supports the development of competitive youth swimming representing just over 40 club teams and close to 6,000 swimmers. PNS's pledge is in addition to a \$10,000 donation made earlier this year. PNS is one of SPLASHForward's early seed funding partners that enabled hiring a professional aquatics consultant. Isaac Sports Group (ISG) was retained by SPLASHForward in 2019 to conduct an independent regional aquatic analysis and feasibility study to lead the vision for a facility that would meet the broad needs of the community and be operationally sustainable. Through broad stakeholder input a financial and operational model was developed that includes community usage, event and economic impact assessment and early partnership model development. SPLASHForward plans to use PNS's funds to maintain support for professional aquatics project consultant costs and design and program refinement.

The public facility being envisioned for Bellevue includes a 25 yard community teaching pool, a configurable (moveable bulkheads) 50 meter main pool with seating for 700 spectators and 920 participants, a deep water tank, a large leisure pool, warm water wellness and therapy pool, and flexible spaces for cardio, fitness, meetings and functions. The Pacific Northwest region has been constrained for so long with limited training and competition facilities, that it is new to consider what having a new comprehensive facility could do to increase the range and types of events not to mention the increased number of youth and masters swimmers that could more fully participate as a result.

Last August, Bellevue City Council gave direction to the City Parks and Community Services staff to work in partnership with SPLASHForward to refine design and site options that had been presented in the 2020 *Bellevue Aquatic Center Feasibility Study* and SPLASHForward's independent feasibility study and analysis report. Direction included returning to Council, which is expected this fall, with a single recommended concept plan for the facility that includes a site recommendation, early partnerships, and a budget proposal for the next steps toward a full concept design study on a selected site.

Amazon's and PNS's support is coming at a time when it is most needed to demonstrate the capacity for the community to bring a much-needed public aquatics facility to Bellevue and the Eastside. It has been 10 years since the City of Bellevue identified the need and scale for a regional sized aquatics facility. It has been 50 years since the last public aquatics center was built. Bellevue's population has grown by nearly two and half times to the current population of 148,000+, swelling to 239,000+ in the daytime with Bellevue's fast growing urban development. King County, through their Aquatics Facility Grant Program, is supporting new aquatics facility development and will begin accepting grant applications later this year where cities, school districts and other entities building or renovating pool facilities can capture up to \$5 million dollars for capital costs over the next six years.