

SPLASHForward is Advocating for Affordable Access to Aquatic Programming for All

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these events to be held within the Bellevue community and increase accessibility for residents from busy families to senior citizens, with plans for a variety of program offerings currently unavailable today.

An increasingly diverse Bellevue has also shed light on SPLASHForward's principle goal of equitable indoor water access; 45% of Latinx children, 64% of Black children, and 66% of Asian children and adults do not know how to swim. "Because of this, minimizing barriers and actively creating equitable aquatic pathways to reduce the risk of drowning becomes paramount to our mission," Pappalardo says. "A public aquatic center will make swim lessons accessible for all in our community and do so in a culturally responsive way through partnership within the community."

This spring, the Bellevue Parks and Community Services unanimously voted to recommend an updated master plan for Bellevue Airfield Park that includes the SPLASHForward's aquatic center concept plan, covered and lighted pickleball courts, a basketball court, picnic areas, trails, and a playground

area. The Bellevue City Council supports the proposal, which is now moving into the environmental study phase and is expected to conclude late this year or early 2024. It will then vote on adopting the master plan of Bellevue Airfield Park, putting the aquatic center into its design phase.

While construction timelines are hard to predict, the design phase for the 130,000-square-foot aquatic facility could conclude near the end of 2024. Following that, 2025 would focus on securing all funding from private and public sources at the city, county, and state levels in partnership with the City of Bellevue, and beginning construction. Ideally, by 2026/2027, the new

Bellevue Aquatic Center will become a reality.

One of the most important parts of making the aquatic facility a reality is community involvement. "We need community members to show up at City of Bellevue and SPLASHForward events to show their support for an aquatics center at Bellevue Airfield Park, preferably wearing blue or in our SPLASHForward t-shirts!" Pappalardo says. Community members can also sign up for the SPLASHForward newsletter via its website (splashforward.org) and follow its social media channels. It is a great way to stay up to date with the organization and advocacy opportunities as they arise.

Teens can also volunteer or sign up to become lifeguards or swim instructors through SPLASHForward's Highschool

All too often, the safety risks of being in and around water go overlooked. In Washington State, drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional injury death for children and teens ages 1 to 17. Of these deaths, 89% are older children and adolescents in open water. Of child drownings, 23% happen near a family pool.

With the greater Eastside surrounded by a variety of lakes, rivers, and shorelines, accessible swimming lessons are crucial to reduce the risk of drowning for members of the Bellevue community and beyond. "There is a great need for modern aquatic facilities and to advocate for affordable access to aquatic programming," SPLASHForward Cofounder Susan Pappalardo remarks. "With a new public aquatic facility, everyone can learn to swim, drownings can be prevented, and our community can safely enjoy the mental and physical health benefits of being in the water."

Since 2017, SPLASHForward has been leading the way towards approving and building Bellevue's first new aquatic center since the 1970s. While the City of Bellevue has worked to collectively improve its public athletic facilities and fields, there hasn't been much attention given to water activities and aquatics.

For parents and youth alike, a new aquatic center would increase the ability of the Eastside to host water sports events and practices. Currently, it is difficult to find any public pool available for high school water polo, swim meets, or swim lessons on the Eastside that is within a 45-minute drive. A local comprehensive public aquatic facility would allow for



Lifeguard Training Program (more information is included on the organization's website). The program addresses the immediate needs of lifeguards and swim instructors to ensure safety at Bellevue's popular

water locations and to remain operating to their fullest.

Pappalardo concludes, "As one of the most diverse communities in the state, Bellevue needs more places that bridge our diversity and keep

us connected. The community and wellness spaces that will be built with the aquatic center expand the many ways for people of all ages and abilities to cross paths, connect, and belong."

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