

New study refutes rationale for closing pool | Roswell Daily Record



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Cahoon Park Pool has been empty and unused since April. Concerned citizens, including, from left, pool contractor Harold Dean and Sue Ferguson, Perry Toles and Tom Jennings stood in the pool shell during a Sept. 20 tour. (Bethany Freudenthal Photo)

A new study and a site visit by a state engineer refute or question much of the information given the public about the now-closed Cahoon Park Pool.

But the interim city manager and the mayor said that doesn't change the plans to keep the pool closed and to funnel city resources to the planned \$20 million recreation and aquatic center.

Asked if he thought the public was properly informed or if city youth had been served by the information provided about Cahoon pool, Interim City Manager and City Engineer Louis Najjar said, "No."

Answering questions in the presence of Public Affairs Director Juanita Jennings, Najjar said that he did not want to speak about decisions made by prior city managers and their staffs. "This has been a lot of turmoil for everybody. ... I don't want to talk about the past. ... Right now, as far as us going forward, there is zero allocated for Cahoon pool."

Najjar's comments follow a Feb. 28 study by Southwest Geophysical Consulting LLC of Albuquerque that indicates, "The Cahoon pool has no large voids beneath the pool bottom."

The \$1,700 study analyzing findings of ground-penetrating radar was commissioned by Gary [auth] Hartwick, who along with his wife, Nancy, has been among the most vocal skeptics of the reasons given

for closing the city's only municipal pool last summer.

The Southwest study also did not find any evidence of pipes under the pool shell, which city staff originally thought might be the case. But Dave Decker of the consulting firm said a drain pipe does exist at one end of pool.

In providing the report, Hartwick said he speaks on behalf of the Cahoon Pool Conservancy. He said that the group has hundreds of interested people, with a few active, core supporters.

Hartwick also met at the pool site with a state engineer, with city permission. The engineer is the one who would have to sign off on re-opening the pool. According to a letter sent by Hartwick to the engineer to verify the conversation, the requirements for re-opening would not involve costly repairs.

"It involves more labor than money," said Hartwick, who also said, "These are all things the city should have done, but they didn't have the facts."

Following receipt of the study and the visit with the state engineer, Hartwick offered the city \$50,000 to fund operating the pool this summer on a shoe-string budget, with free admission to the public, should the pool be found to be operational. Because the pool has been sitting empty and unused for about a year, Hartwick said, the pool needs to be filled, the pumps need to be run and the pool's current operating condition needs to be assessed.

But Hartwick said he withdrew his offer after the city attorney added many more stipulations, including that liability insurance would be needed and the group would have to pay for any changes in the condition of the pool such as pump failures. Hartwick said his position is, if pumps failed during the summer, then the pool would be closed to swimmers at that point.

Najar said that the conditions proffered were standard for third-party groups.

"Any outside source, whenever there is an agreement made, there is always a liability clause that holds the city harmless," he said. "Everything that was asked of Gary was not anything different than what we ask from anybody else."

Najar added that he thought Hartwick's estimates of cost were too low. He said he would estimate the cost of cleaning up, prepping and operating the pool for the summer at \$150,000 to \$200,000.

Mayor Dennis Kintigh said that he has not seen or read anything to make him think the pool should be operating or that the public was misinformed.

"I disagree emphatically. I'm sorry, but the people who have the most familiarity with that facility were unanimous in advising us that it was not prudent to continue operating it," Kintigh said.

He said he doesn't see the Southwest study as a game-changer and has no regrets about not conducting more studies to determine the condition of Cahoon pool. He said he disagrees with "delays and pouring money down the drain."

"The pool is still leaking water," he said. "It is still broken. It is still a 83-year-old, failing facility that needed to be replaced decades ago and it wasn't. And now we are striving to get that replacement done promptly."

Last April, the city first began publicly discussing the idea of closing Cahoon pool, which city staff said was losing \$150,000 a year. Safety was also a big concern voiced by then-city manager Jonathan Phillips and some city councilors. A few councilors publicly talked of their fears that the pool could fall into a

“sinkhole.”

Within a few weeks, the city council had voted to decommission the pool. After many contentious public meetings in which some people asked the city to reconsider, elected city officials nixed ideas to re-open Cahoon, even temporarily, and instead voted to move forward with plans to build a \$18 million recreation and aquatic center at the Cielo Grande Recreation Area on the northwest side of the city.

In early February, city councilors approved several sales tax increases to fund the new project, now estimated to cost at least \$20 million.

Kintigh said he remains convinced that Cahoon pool could not have been renovated to meet current needs and that the site is inappropriate, given that it lies in a flood zone and lacks space for adequate parking.

“Why do you want to keep pouring money into an old structure that is not meeting needs? What is the opposition to moving forward?” he asked. “Tastes change. Needs change. Safety changes. Could you continue to retrofit? Sure, but why not design and build a modern facility?”

Najar and Kintigh said that Hartwick, the conservancy group or any other third-party entity can submit a proposal to run Cahoon, but that no serious negotiations can occur until a written proposal is presented.

“Send us a written proposal so we know exactly what is being proposed. That is why we need it in writing, so there is a clear understanding of what is being proposed,” said Kintigh. “Then staff, which would include the attorney, can sit down and have a discussion. ... What I am getting at is that you have to have the written proposal as a beginning spot. ... As I’ve said, I have not seen a written proposal and verbal ones don’t count. We have to follow all sorts of state statutes about how we enter into agreements.”

Although Hartwick stated in a March 10 letter to the mayor and city councilors that they did not do their due diligence, Kintigh remains sure of his decision.

“We would be happy to have discussions with anyone who wants to operate it, but we need to move forward with a new facility,” he said. “And to continue to pour money into a facility that is going to be replaced, I think is not prudent.”

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