CM13.9. Aquatics Strategy Update

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Purpose of Report

To provide Council with background context and outcomes of the 2017 Aquatics Strategy, as well as to highlight more recent developments and provide recommendations to continue to progress the implementation of the Strategy.

Background

2017 Aquatics Strategy Overview

During 2016 and 2017, AlburyCity went through an extensive process to develop the Albury City Council Aquatic Strategy. The process involved two rounds of community consultation with several updates and reports presented to Council throughout the process. The two most recent Council reports on the Strategy are from April 2016 (**Attachment 1)** and June 2017 (**Attachment 2)**.

Council engaged the services of Otium Planning Group (OPG), who are specialists in the planning, facility development, management and funding for the sport, recreation and leisure industries to assist in the development of the Strategy. OPG undertook detailed analysis on several sites using 19 assessment criteria factors. This resulted in seven options for aquatics development being detailed in the report and presented to Council. These options included retaining the current seasonal facilities being Albury Swim Centre (ASC) and Lavington Swim Centre (LSC), developing a local and/or regional aquatic facilities at Lauren Jackson Sports Centre (LJSC) or LSC, or a mix of retaining one or both seasonal facilities with a local or regional facility.

The draft AlburyCity Aquatic Strategy was completed in January 2016 and was put on public display through to March 2016. A total of 749 “Have your say” submissions were received.

At its meeting on 26 April 2016, Council reviewed the future recommended Aquatic facility strategies and facility development/redevelopment options and resolved to:

a. Note the contents of this report.

b. Receive and note the petition from the Albury Diving Club.

c. Endorse the further development and prioritisation of Options 1 and 4, by way of further investigation, analysis and funding strategies, inclusive of 1m and 3m springboard diving facilities.

d. Incorporate these findings into a Final Draft Aquatics Strategy for further presentation to Council and seek Council endorsement to publicly exhibit the final draft 28 days prior to Council considering its adoption.

Following this resolution, further detailed analysis was undertaken on Options 1 & 4 with the quantitative summary presented in the table below:

Aquatic Strategy Option	10 Year Projected Visits	10 Year Projected Operational Profit/(Loss)	10-year Operational Profit/(Loss) Per Visit	Estimated Combined Facility Option Capital Cost
1. Retain both ASC and LSC and Upgrade as Required and No Regional Aquatic Leisure Centre Developed	1.472M	($7.023M)	($4.76/visit)	$13M
4. Develop LJSC Regional Aquatic Leisure Centre and Retain refurbished ASC and Close LSC.	7.003M	($2.576M)	($0.36/visit)	$47M

The business modelling highlighted that developing a regional facility at LJSC and retaining the Albury Swim Centre provided a better operating result than continuing to operate both the Albury and Lavington Swim Centres and a report was presented to Council accordingly.

Council did not commit to this in 2017, with factors influencing their decision including the significant capital cost, the social and political implications of closing the Lavington Swim Centre and the need to further engage with Wodonga to seek feedback on the proposal for a regional aquatics facility.

At its meeting in June 2017 Council ultimately resolved to:

a. Receive and note the report and the final Draft Aquatics Strategy as presented

b. Endorse Option 1 (retain the Albury and Lavington Swim Centres) and amend the Aquatics Strategy Document accordingly as final, including

- *i. Continuing to operate both existing swim centres*
- *ii. Replacing the Lavington Swim Centre in 2021/22 (subject to on-going condition assessments); and*
- *iii. Upgrading and refurbishing the Albury Swim Centre in line with the concept master plan for the facility including seating, shade, change room upgrades, improved disability access etc)*

c. Continue the collaborative discussions with the City of Wodonga in relation to the future development of a regional aquatic facility; and

d. Not publicly exhibit the final Draft Aquatics Strategy

Following this resolution Otium Planning Group amended the Aquatics Strategy Document and finalised the Albury City Council Aquatic Strategy (**Attachment 3**).

Aquatics Strategy Implementation

Based on Council's resolution above, the following has been implemented since 2017.

- $12m allocated in the Four-Year Delivery Program (4YDP) for the replacement of the Lavington Swim Centre (like for like) including pools and buildings. $600,000 is currently allocated in 2022/23 for pre-planning and detailed designs to commence this project.
- $900,000 allocated in 2024/25 in the draft 4YDP to master plan the upgrade to Albury Swim Centre in line with resolution. The master planning of this facility was to occur earlier but has been deferred to allow for the Murray River Experience process to be completed as this will influence the future planning of that entire precinct and potential opportunities and efficiencies with facility location and future use.

It is expected that the upgrades to the ASC will include additional shading, seating and changeroom upgrades but the exact detail of the upgrades are to be finalised following a master planning process involving stakeholder engagement.

The main findings from the engineering assessments of LSC include:

- The concrete within pool shells and concourse has Alkali Silica Reaction (ASR) which is a form of concrete cancer. The shell structure of the pools is in reasonable condition and will be serviceable for the short term. The concrete however would not cope with any sort of development (access ramp example) involving demolition or additions to the existing shells and concourse, for example adding an access ramp to the 50m pool.
- There continues to be on-going issues with broken tiles, tiles coming off and this continues to be a risk management matter for Council and contracted management.
- The condition of major pipe, valves and in-ground pipe work is at the end of its useful life. Treatment and maintenance of this infrastructure is extremely difficult and would require access through the compromised concrete. There continues to be the chance of major failure with major pipe works and valves.

A Regional Aquatic Facility

The key features of a Regional Aquatic Centre are:

- Leisure and adventure water, water slides etc.
- Indoor 50m pool (or 51.5m pool with 1.5m moveable boom to create more flexibility in use for aquatic sports).
- Program pools (for swimming lesson programs, exercise classes etc).
- Hydrotherapy pools with warmer and fully accessible shallow water.

In order to improve the operational performance and financial viability, the following elements are often included:

- Gym
- Group fitness rooms/studios
- Café
- Merchandise
- Allied Health options

The analysis that informed the Aquatics Strategy assumed all of the above elements were included in the business modelling for a Regional Aquatics facility in Albury. The major demographic profile of users of a regional aquatic facility are the Recreational, Leisure and Adventure demographic who represent 60%-70% of users. This demographic is made up of families, friends and social groups who are seeking to utilise leisure and adventure water.

Recent Developments

Under the Two Cities One Community (2C1C) partnership and in accordance with Council's resolution from June 2017, an investigation was undertaken into a regional aquatic facility at either LJSC or WAVES in Wodonga. Both were deemed suitable for a regional facility although LJSC rated slightly higher due to geographic location in respect to population.

In September 2020 AlburyCity submitted a proposal for a regional aquatics facility as part of the Regional Deal process. It was considered as part of a Cities of Sport feasibility analysis.

The City of Wodonga have now prioritised the asset replacement and upgrades of their current facilities in the short to medium term and a regional aquatic facility has not been identified in the Wodonga Council 2036 Plan.

Lauren Jackson Sports Centre

Following extensive community consultation, Council endorsed a two-stage master plan development of the LJSC in 2018. Stage 1 has progressed with all detailed plans and tender documentation completed, and funding has been allocated in the 4YDP with a further $5M being sought from the NSW Government, with an application through the Office of Sport, Multi-Sport Community Facility Fund recently submitted by Council.

Although Stage 2 is only in the preliminary planning phase, the concept is expected to include additional sports courts with participation increasing by over 20% over the last three years resulting in the existing facility nearing capacity. A detailed feasibility study involving further community and stakeholder engagement is planned to understand what other facilities and services the community is seeking, and to support any future grant funding applications to other levels of government.

Thurgoona-Wirlinga Growth Corridor

A range of future planning for Thurgoona is underway or in progress, the outcome of which will have a significant impact on where future sport and recreation facilities, including aquatics, may be located within the growth corridor.

Strategic Alignment

Albury 2030

This project aligns to Albury 2030, under the following:

3. A Caring Community

3.4 Albury offers a diverse and accessible range of facilities and activities for all ages

3.4.3 Promote and encourage healthy lifestyles through development and efficient use of sporting, recreational, educational and cultural facilities and infrastructure.

Two Cities One Community
Investigating the establishment of a regional aquatic facility was an action in the 2019/20 2C1C Action plan. As described in this report, this action has been completed.

Issues

Increase utilisation of existing assets.

All councils have an obligation to ensure that the assets they control on behalf of their community are utilised effectively and efficiently. Demand for Council services, including aquatics, can change over time and as such it is pertinent that Council review the services that it provides on a regular basis. There are several short to mid-term actions that AlburyCity could take to increase the utilisation of the existing aquatic facilities.

Extension of the Albury Swim Centre for 2021/22 season
The 2020/21 year was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic with the aquatic and leisure industries one of the worst affected. In an attempt to control the spread of the pandemic, many state governments elected to close aquatic facilities for extensive periods or enforce strict social distancing measures that limited utilisation and had a direct impact on the financial operations of the facilities. However, due to the financial support received via the JobKeeper payments, the Albury aquatic facilities ended the financial year more favourably than what was expected in the budget. Given the interruption to accessing aquatic services over the past two years, it is proposed that Council consider using these funds to extend the current season of the Albury Swim Centre from Sunday 24 April 2022 to Sunday 8 May 2022.

The estimated net operational cost of extending the current season by two weeks is estimated to be approximately $25,000 and could be accommodated in the current budget given the favourable funding that resulted from the 2020/21 aquatics season.

Should Council endorse this recommendation, council officers and Aligned Leisure will consider options for existing membership holders to continue their membership for this period as well as promote the extension through various channels to maximise casual visitation.

Operate Swim Centre(s) all year round
Options to operate one of the existing swim centres all year round could be considered and further investigated. This option would change the current contractual arrangements with management of the facility and therefore would need to be negotiated.

This is not a common practice for stand-alone outdoor pools in southern Australia due to the significant increase in power and heating usage, subsequent operational costs and the fact it would only cater for a small number of the community. It would however provide an option for year-round swimming access in Albury and allow Council the opportunity to gather data on use during the off-season periods. At this stage it is estimated that the additional on-cost will exceed $400k per annum.

Pool Enclosures

Some councils in Australia have installed enclosures over their outdoor community pools to facilitate utilisation during winter. Both permanent and temporary enclosure options of covering the Albury Swim Centre have extensively been explored through previous aquatic strategies.

A covered option was not included as part of the seven options in the 2017 Aquatics Strategy as any new development option was targeted at providing facilities which would maximise facility user attraction and provide components to meet all user markets of a successful facility, which the strategy document details.

Commonly identified issues with covering outdoor pools with structures includes condensation build up, air management and plant function. Managing the humidity and quality of the air is particularly challenging when there are two pools serviced by the same plant and it is decided to enclose only one of the pools. To address these issues and create an environment that will be acceptable to swimmers often requires greater inputs of power, gas and chemicals as well as new plant systems. In addition, consideration would need to be given to enclosing the access to the amenities.

A covered structure in Albury would also require a review of the current operations contract and the determination of the new operational costs. Although the technology continues to evolve, the previous studies have indicated that the investment required has not represented acceptable value for money.

A covered structure may be further investigated and considered as an interim option until an indoor aquatic facility is constructed and operational.

Upgrade and Development of Albury's Aquatic Facilities

Lavington Swim Centre

As mentioned previously, Council is scheduled to progress detailed design of a like-for-like facility at Lavington Swim Centre in 2023/24. Although the 2017 Aquatic Strategy and subsequent Council resolution recommended against the development of a regional aquatic facility at this site, Council could choose to postpone the detailed design of a like-for-like facility to explore this option. Such a delay would increase the risk of an unscheduled service interruption as the infrastructure particularly the pipework and valves continue to wear.

Lauren Jackson Sports Centre

The 2017 Aquatics Strategy identified the LJSC as the preferred location in Albury for a Regional Aquatics facility. Council is currently drafting the scope of the Feasibility Study for the Stage 2 development of the LJSC which is due for commencement in the current financial year. This scope could be expanded to include both additional court capacity as well as provisions for a regional aquatics facility, and adjustment to the March quarterly budget review could accommodate the additional scope.

Comprehensive Review

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic together with improvements in information technology and related infrastructure has seen a surge in regional population growth. AlburyCity has experienced this,

particularly in the Thurgoona-Wirlinga growth corridor. Given the recent and projected growth in this part of the LGA, Council may choose to suspend major capital expenditure on aquatics facilities until some further strategic planning work in the Thurgoona-Wirlinga growth corridor has been completed. This action may be appropriate, if Council decides that LJSC is not the most appropriate location, but it would further delay the progression of a regional aquatics centre

Should Council consider changing the current direction of the 2017 Aquatics Strategy to explore other aquatic developments as a priority, then there are many options to consider as well as a number of issues and opportunities including:

- Financial impacts of further investigations, feasibilities, concept plan developments and business modelling. There is currently no allocation for these items in the 4YDP.
- Potential impact, opportunities and direction for existing swim centres.
- The condition of the Lavington Swim Centre.
- Potential impact, opportunities and direction for the Stage 2 development of the LJSC.

The development of a new indoor aquatic facility would realistically be a 5–10-year process to allow for feasibility, business modelling, pre-planning and investigation, approvals, detailed designs, tender processes and construction in addition to developing a funding strategy, lobbying and securing the required funds.

Risk

- **Business Risk** – The extension of the current pool season by two weeks can be accommodated in the existing budget and the pool operators have indicated that they can contract trained staff to operate the facility during this period. A consolidated Feasibility Study that considers both stadium sports and a Regional Aquatics facility at the Lauren Jackson Sports Centre is required to ensure the most effective and efficient design of both components. A detailed Feasibility Study will also be required to attract Federal and/or State Government funding to progress the Stage 2 development.
- **Corporate Risk** – Given the community interest in this matter and significant consultation that has occurred during the development of aquatic strategies and plans in recent years, it is important that the direction of aquatic planning and any changes to it are well communicated to the community.
- **WHS and Public Risk** – The issues of broken tiles and tiles coming off the pool shells at Lavington Swim Centre will need to be continually managed by facility management and Council to reduce risk to the public.
- **Environmental Risk** – None identified.
- **Delivery Program Risk** – The negotiation requirements and management of a two-week extension of the current pool season at ASC, as well as increasing the scope of the LJSC Stage 2 Feasibility study can be accommodated with the existing resources of AlburyCity's Leisure Facilities Team.

Community Engagement

In developing the 2017 Aquatics Strategy there were two rounds of extensive community consultation with excellent engagement levels as is detailed in Attachments 1 and 2 to this report.

Any change to Council's Aquatic Strategy and/or the direction for potential aquatic development should be well communicated to the community with any engagement to be specific to potential changes and not repeating previous consultation matters and options.

Council has been actively engaging with PCYC NSW to ensure complimentary planning is undertaken in the LJSC/PCYC precinct.

Options

1. Increase utilisation of the existing aquatic facilities by:
    i. Extending the 2021/22 swim season to 8 May 2022 at Albury Swim Centre. **Recommended**.
    This option would enable better utilisation of the existing facilities in the short-term and can be accommodated in the current budget due to Federal Government's COVID support packages, which delivered a better than expected financial result for the 2020/21 season.
    ii. Investigating and providing a further report to Council on the feasibility of year-round operation of the Albury Swim Centre (commencing 2023), including negotiating in-principle contract arrangements with Aligned Leisure. **Recommended**.
    Undertaking a full investigation, including community consultation to determine demand and operating times, would allow Council to make an informed decision regarding the level of investment required to extend the service and to maximise use of existing facilities. This option would require a 1-year extension of the provision of management services for aquatic facilities agreement that AlburyCity and City of Wodonga have with Aligned Leisure.

    Or:

    iii. Including provisions in the 2022/23 budget to operate the Albury Swim Centre through-out 2023 and negotiate contract arrangements with Aligned Leisure accordingly. **Not Recommended**.
    This option is not fully costed, and there is a risk that there may be a lack of qualified personnel to operate the facility through winter and the community demand for using an outdoor aquatic facility in Albury during winter is not quantified.

    And:

    iv. Include provisions in the 2022/23 budget to undertake detailed feasibility analysis of a temporary enclosure of Albury Swim Centre. **Not Recommended**.
    Consideration has been given to this option previously. Further analysis may afford Council the opportunity to better understand the challenges and benefits associated with enclosing an outdoor facility to provide protection from the cooler winter temperatures; however, it will not provide an indication of the demand from leisure users who want to use the leisure and adventure water during winter.

2. Upgrade and/or develop Albury's aquatic facilities by:
   i. Continuing with the planned implementation of the 2017 Aquatics Strategy including;
      a. Continue to allocate funding in 2024/25 to masterplan the upgrade of the Albury Swim Centre, until the outcome of further related investigations are completed. **Recommended**;
      This option is consistent with the adopted Strategy and allows sufficient time for other related investigations to be completed prior to any planning or works commencing at the Albury Swim Centre.
      b. Progress design of the like for like replacement, to current and best practice standards, of the Lavington Swim Centre in 2023/24. **Recommended**
      This will allow Council to progress design and report back to Council on any variation from like for like replacement, following consultation and analysis of the site and current and best practices standards for aquatic facilities.

      And;

      c. Broaden the scope of LJSC Stage 2 Feasibility Study to include both stadium sports and a regional indoor aquatic facility. **Recommended**
      This option allows Council to progress the design and further feasibility of the development of a regional aquatic centre at the previously recommended location in a timely manner.

   Or:

   ii. Postpone the design phase of the Lavington Swim Centre. **Not Recommended**
   This would allow Council to undertake another comprehensive review of the Aquatics Strategy prior to committing funds to re-develop the Lavington Swim Centre. However, given the condition of the LSC, it is important that the design process commences as soon as possible to enable its replacement prior to asset failure. Should the consultation and analysis during the design phase result in any variation from a like for like replacement, to ensure it is to relevant current and best practice standards, this can be considered by Council in due course as the design project progresses;

   And;

   iii. Undertake a comprehensive review of the Aquatics Strategy, exploring current and alternate locations. **Not Recommended**.
   Given the significant community engagement and investment by Council in developing the 2017 Strategy, this option is not recommended at this time. Any comprehensive review of the citywide aquatics strategy should only be undertaken on completion of the strategic planning underway for the Thurgoona Growth Corridor. This option would also significantly delay progress towards the establishment of a Regional Aquatic Facility.

Conclusion

AlburyCity Council went through an extensive process in developing an Aquatics Strategy for the community during 2016 and 2017. Council resolved in June 2017 to maintain and replace the two seasonal outdoor pools and to "c*ontinue the collaborative discussions with the City of Wodonga in relation to the future development of a regional aquatic facility"*.

Council has committed significant funding to the replacement of the LSC and upgrades to ASC based on their 2017 resolution. An investigation into the establishment of a regional aquatic facility as part of the 2019/20 Two Cities One Community Action Plan has been completed, with LJSC proving to be slightly more favourable than WAVES as a preferred location. The City of Wodonga is currently focussing on the maintenance and upgrades of their existing aquatic facilities in the short to medium term.

The Stage 1 planning for LJSC has been completed and primarily focuses on improvements within the existing footprint of the facility. The Stage 2 planning is now ready to progress, and this will include a feasibility study into the demand for additional stadium capacity. The scope of the Stage 2 planning could be broadened to investigate how additional stadium infrastructure and a regional aquatic centre could be established within the LJSC precinct. Meanwhile the future planning of the Thurgoona Wirlinga Growth corridor, including sport and recreation infrastructure, is progressing, the outcomes of which should be a key consideration in any future comprehensive review of the Aquatics Strategy.

The time required to establish a regional aquatic facility is expected to exceed five years. As such this report also considers options to increase the utilisation of the existing aquatic facilities in the interim.

Recommendation

That Council:

a. Increases utilisation of the existing aquatic facilities by:
    i. Extending the 2021/22 swim season to 8 May 2022 at Albury Swim Centre; and
    ii. Investigating and providing a further report to Council on the feasibility of year-round operation of the Albury Swim Centre (commencing 2023), including negotiating in-principle contract arrangements with Aligned Leisure;

b. Upgrades and/or develops Albury's aquatic facilities by continuing with the planned implementation of the Aquatics Strategy including:
    i. Progress design of the like for like replacement, to current and best practice standards, of the Lavington Swim Centre in 2023/24; and
    ii. Continue to allocate funding in 2024/25 to masterplan the upgrade of the Albury Swim Centre, until the outcome of further related investigations are completed; and

c. Broadens the scope of LJSC Stage 2 Feasibility Study to include both stadium sports and a regional indoor aquatic facility.

Attachments

1. Council Report and Resolution April 26 2016 (DOC22/55226).
2. Council Report and Resolution June 26 2017 (DOC22/55227).
3. Albury City Council Final Aquatic Strategy June 2017 (DOC17/115890).