

Dunlap Pool Wraps Up Another Season With Improvements Ahead

As another summer at the Dunlap Community Swimming Pool ends, work to maintain and improve the community facility is far from finished. A significant improvement is planned for September, when work will begin to stabilize areas surrounding the pool deck and relevel sections of concrete that have settled.

The upcoming project is the latest in a growing list of improvements made at the pool in recent years as Pool Manager Gary Neilsen and Assistant Pool Manager and Head Lifeguard Jennifer Neilsen, working in partnership with the City of Dunlap and the Dunlap Betterment Group, have focused on making the facility safer, more inviting and more attractive to families.

The September project will address settling that has occurred around portions of the pool deck. Because the pool was constructed on a hillside, Gary said the surrounding banks have gradually shifted over the years, contributing to erosion beneath portions of the concrete.

A company was brought in last year to level sections of the deck, but some areas have since begun settling again, including concrete near the diving board ladder.

This time, the project will go a step further.

“Over time, with the pool being built on a sidehill like that, those banks have given away a little bit,” Gary said. “The cement around the pool deck has started to sag.”

The planned work will include an anchoring system intended to help stabilize the bank before the concrete is releveled.

“The anchoring system will hold that bank in place a little bit so there’s not the washout from underneath,” Gary said. “When they pump leveling under it, it should stay a lot better and hold the cement more level, and hopefully it’s something that will last the pool for many years.”

Funding for the pool deck project is being provided by the Dean J. King Foundation.

For Gary and Jenn, maintaining the facility goes beyond appearances.

“The wall improvement is going to be huge because we don’t want cement sinking, we don’t want the pool pulling apart, we don’t want places where people can trip and fall,” Gary said. “We want to get everything leveled up as best we can. We want to cut down on potential accidents.”

Years of improvements add up

The deck work follows several years of improvements that have gradually transformed the pool.

Recent investments have included shade structures, painting inside and outside the bathhouse, new lifeguard chairs and lounge chairs, new picnic tables and benches inside and outside the bathhouse, repair of the mushroom fountain, a nonverbal communication sign, painting of the pool surface and replacement of the pool heater, among numerous other improvements.

Jenn said those investments are making a noticeable difference in how people view the facility.

“When we took over the pool, we started to think, ‘How can we make it more attractive, especially to families?’” she said.

Adding shade and more seating has helped encourage families to spend more time at the pool, she said, and the facility is increasingly attracting people beyond Dunlap.

“We have definitely seen an increase in people from out of town,” Jenn said. “Word is spreading that our facility is family friendly.”

Some visitors who initially came from outside the community have gone on to purchase memberships, she said.

Gary said that response is part of what guides decisions about where to invest next.

“When we look at trying to make improvements, it’s not necessarily what makes it easier for us, but what’s going to draw the attention of the public to get people to use the pool,” he said.

Something as simple as fresh paint can make a difference in how people perceive the facility, he added.

“If we have old, crappy equipment, people aren’t going to trust it,” Gary said. “With new improvements, like the painting we did last summer, the compliments from people talking about how clean everything looks — things like that” make a difference.

Safety remains the priority

While physical improvements are visible to patrons, some of the most important work happening at the pool is less noticeable.

Gary and Jenn have placed an increased emphasis on lifeguard training and coordination with Dunlap Fire and Rescue so both groups know what to expect from one another if a serious emergency occurs at the pool.

“We’ve always said the safety of our patrons is the number one thing,” Jenn said. “Even though we do training, it’s going to be our local rescue and fire department that we would have to team up with if there was an accident at the pool. The more we practice, the more prepared we are.”

The pool and fire department recently participated in another training exercise designed to simulate what would happen during a water emergency.

Gary said the goal is to make sure rescuers arriving at the pool understand what lifeguards will already have done and can continue the response rather than “coming in and starting from scratch.”

For the pool’s young lifeguards, Jenn said practicing an actual scenario is particularly valuable.

“These are teenagers. We have a lot of 15-year-olds that are lifeguarding for us,” she said. “In our training, it’s always, ‘What if? What if?’ Doing an actual simulation like this allows them to take it in a little bit and emotionally prepare them better.”

The training also gives families another reason to feel comfortable using the facility. “I think the members of the community that pay attention to that stuff, it’s got to be a little more reassuring to them that our guards are training on that stuff in the event something drastic would happen,” Gary said.

Finding ways to keep the pool staffed

Staffing municipal pools has become a challenge for communities across the area, particularly late in the summer as lifeguards juggle fairs, sports and other commitments. Dunlap adjusted its pool hours this season in an effort to give lifeguards a better balance while maintaining access for patrons.

Gary said the pool previously reached a point late in the summer where the same four or five lifeguards could end up working double shifts day after day.

The change in hours helped alleviate some of that pressure, and lifeguards responded positively to the adjustment.

“All around, it kind of worked out well,” Gary said.

At the same time, another use of the pool has continued to grow: private pool parties.

“We had such a huge interest in pool parties, we had to make special accommodations for that,” Jenn said.

Looking beyond summer swimming

Gary and Jenn already have a wish list for future improvements.

Among the priorities are another elevated lifeguard chair for the 10-foot section of the pool, a new water heater for the bathhouse, approximately 20 additional patio chairs and 20 more sets of floating weights for water aerobics.

They are also thinking beyond equipment.

Jenn would like to explore additional adult programming, potentially including activities focused on wellness and relaxation.

“The pool’s not just for kids,” she said. “It’s a resource that everyone can use for their physical and mental health. That’s why it’s so important for our size of town, having such a nice facility.”

Gary would also like to explore more opportunities that give adults a reason to use the pool, such as dedicated adult nights or other alcohol-free events.

“I’d like to find some other things than just having the pool open,” he said. “Are there things that we can do that will attract more patrons?”

For the Neilsens, the improvements, programming, staffing and emergency training are all pieces of the same goal: ensuring Dunlap continues to have a pool residents want to use and feel confident using.

“Everything in a community is teamwork, no matter what it is,” Jenn said.

With another season nearly complete and another major improvement scheduled to begin just weeks after the gates close, that work will continue well beyond the last swim of summer.