

**Save Mayfield Swimming Pool (SMSP) Community Group  
Submission to Newcastle City Council  
Re: Pool Service Delivery Model 2007 Draft Report V1.0**

**Submitted by Tom Griffiths  
on behalf of the SMSP Group**

***Save Mayfield Swimming Pool:  
Improve it, don't remove it***

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## **Context and Summary**

This submission comes in the context of the draft report, commissioned by Newcastle City Council (The Pool Service Delivery Model (hereafter PSDM)) which, to the surprise and shock of a large number of residents of Mayfield and adjoining suburbs, recommended the closure of Mayfield Swimming Pool and its replacement with a "Mayfield Community / Leisure Hub". This submission thus comes in the context of many hastily organised, but very large public meetings in response to this proposal. At these meetings residents representing the full diversity of the local community expressed serious concern over the perceived lack of (or at best inadequate) consultation with the community, the seemingly confused and contradictory rationale for the proposed closure, and above all else articulated grave (and frequently quite passionate) concerns over the possible loss of this significant and historical community facility.

The Save Mayfield Swimming Pool (SMSP) community group emerged out of the first of these community meetings, held on August 19. Some immediate actions were taken, including a peaceful public protest at the Town Hall (August 28), the preparation of petitions, and the establishment of a blog. A second, larger public meeting was held (Sept 16), followed by an even larger attendance at the Council's public consultation meeting scheduled for Mayfield pool. It must be stressed that this high level of community participation, in and of itself, constitutes a substantial number of substantive submissions to Council against the closure of Mayfield Pool. This written submission, in the name of the SMSP group, seeks to capture and synthesise this large number of voices, and their arguments for maintaining Mayfield Swimming Pool.

The SMSP public meetings endorsed four fundamental principles for our subsequent campaign:

1. That Mayfield Swimming Pool remain in public ownership.
2. That Council make a long-term commitment to the Pool, at least until 2030.
3. That Council commit to improving the Pool in this period.
4. That Council support the establishment of an ongoing Pool management committee with community representation.

These principles underlie, and are reflected in, the substance of this submission. In summary, this submission sets out a number of key arguments why the PSDM report's recommendation to close Mayfield Pool should not be supported. It does so by highlighting flaws in this recommendation, raising questions about the validity of key assumptions on which it is based, and by reaffirming the established and well accepted social, health and community benefits and potential of maintaining the swimming pool facility generally, and the added social justice dimension of maintaining a swimming pool facility in Mayfield.

## **1. The PSDM proposal to close Mayfield Swimming Pool is flawed**

The draft PSDM proposal to close Mayfield Swimming Pool has a number of significant problems, to the extent that the SMSP group believes that this recommendation is fundamentally flawed. The problems with this proposal emerge within the terms of the argument (and its rationale) set out in the PSDM, and more broadly against broader principles and criteria which are either absent or inadequately addressed in the draft PSDM report.

### **1.1 Projected Savings and transfer of patronage to support the Newcastle Aquatic & Leisure Centre (NA&LC)**

The draft PSDM's call for the closure of Mayfield Swimming Pool, to be (possibly) replaced with a 'Community / Leisure Hub', is presented as "a key PSDM reform" (p. 42) to reduce Council's costs and support "the future performance of the NA&LC." (p. 41). A close reading of the PSDM suggests that this is, in fact, the central reason for the proposal to close Mayfield Pool: the projected savings to Council and contribution to the planned profitability of the major redevelopment of Lambton (NA&LC).

Given the importance of this rationale for the proposed closure of Mayfield Pool, we would expect to find a detailed breakdown of the projected budget and savings for the Mayfield Community / Leisure Hub concept, as against the current performance of the swimming pool facility. Further, we would expect this detail to outline the basis on which such projections are made, such that the figures can be independently tested, or verified, or at the very least more thoroughly considered by the community. The PSDM does not provide this detail, instead simply providing on page 42 "estimated" running costs of \$120,000 and "estimated" income from a coffee shop and room hire of \$30,000, to arrive at a projected "net saving to Council" of \$170,000. Members of our group requested the detailed breakdown, and rationale for these projections, but apparently these could not be provided. A letter from Mr Graham Clarke (dated October 19) to Mr Tom Griffiths, in response to his query, advised Mr Griffiths that such detail and the underlying reasoning could not be provided for these projections, since "the financial information included in the draft PSDM report in respect of the Mayfield Community/Leisure Hub concept proposal was provided by the consultant and is not part of the Council's records".

The result here is that the significant projected savings of \$170,000 simply cannot be accepted without a comparable and rigorously defensible breakdown of projected costs and income.

Even if the figures were detailed and defensible, however, this would only resolve the technical question of the size of the financial saving. The question of whether one facility should be closed to effectively subsidise the proposed redevelopment of (repayments for) another facility is one that goes beyond simple mathematics. The principle of cost subsidies clearly has social justice potential if applied in a way to deliver affordable services to sections of the society who would otherwise not have access to these due to socio-economic and / or geographical conditions. In this case, however, it amounts to a relatively disadvantaged area of the Newcastle Local Government Area - Mayfield and surrounding suburbs - effectively subsidizing services available to more advantaged areas. The difficult question emerges then as to why Mayfield and its surrounding communities should be the

ones to deliver "an overall reduction in the net operating costs associated with Council's operated swimming pools" PSDM, p. 42).

The PSDM also implies that, in addition to these (unsubstantiated) projected savings detailed above; the closure of Mayfield Pool will contribute additional numbers to the NA&LC, further contributing to its viability. Here again the details are scarce: no discussion of the numbers of swimmers at Mayfield, estimates of the projected numbers who will move to the NA&LC, or to a commercially provided alternative (given the planned costs of visits to the NA&LC). Absent again is any explicit consideration of the social justice implications, even if the projected contribution to the patronage of NA&LC was adequately detailed and defensible. Here too then, the central rationale for closing Mayfield Pool does not stand up to close scrutiny, and raises multiple and substantial further questions that require reasoned analysis and responses.

### **1.2 Replication of services**

In addition to the financial argument addressed above the PSDM puts forward a replication argument to defend the proposal to close Mayfield Pool: there are too many Council swimming pools offering the same service, and diverse offerings are required. There is some merit in providing diverse services, but this is clearly possible without closing Mayfield (or any other) swimming pool, as is envisaged for all other swimming centres. Diverse services can be delivered without closing any pool, and models to improve attendance could be based on this.

The logic applied here in the PSDM is confused, and at times contradictory, once again raising questions over the validity of its central proposal. If Mayfield's proximity to commercially operated pools is a reason to support its closure, as suggested in the PSDM report, the same logic could be applied to other Council pools. Further, using this logic the proposed NA&LC's proximity to the commercial sports and aquatic centre, The Forum, itself currently undertaking a substantial (\$500,000) refurbishment, could imply that the NA&LC concept is not viable and should not proceed. If, on the other hand, the proposed NA&LC will be sufficiently different from all other Council pools (and nearby commercial operations) to not require their closure for its financial viability, the rationale for identifying Mayfield for closure loses credibility.

### **1.3 Declining patronage**

The PSDM report is underpinned by Council's concerns about the costs of delivering services, and increased financial deficits at all swimming centres. Long-term trends of declining patronage are reported, coinciding with the well-documented general expansion of the quantity and scope of leisure activities. Overall pool attendances clearly appear much more stable over the past decade, particularly if we apply industry practice to consider averages over at least 3-year periods so as to account for irregularities attributable to exceptionally warm or cold seasons.

For Mayfield in particular, pool use figures from 1999/2000 through to 2004/05 are quite stable, with drops in 2005/06 and 2006/07 coinciding with the removal of the kids' water slide, which significantly reduced their activity options at the pool. The PSDM figures also highlight that non-school use has been stable even in these recent seasons, with much of the decline in numbers attributable to reduced school attendances. Given that both public and Catholic schools have been some of the strongest advocates for maintaining Mayfield swimming pool, it is reasonable to

conclude that their use will not fall further, and hence that the impression of further (indefinite) decline at Mayfield pool (and elsewhere) is not accurate.

An active strategy of working with schools to ensure the pool is attractive to them for use during school hours could ensure that school use numbers not only remain steady, but increase over time. Further, the PSDM itself acknowledges that "Redeveloped or renewed facilities are reporting reversals in previously declining attendances" (p. 16), and cites reversals in falling numbers at both Beresfield and Stockton following the installation of heating, a relatively modest investment. As we argue later, responses that invest in and improve the facility, in consultation with schools and the broader community, will consolidate and significantly improve attendance rates. The demographics of Mayfield, with above Newcastle LGA average percentage of "couple families with children", strengthens the case for alternative responses that seriously seek to improve this facility.

#### **1.4 The proposed "water play-park" is not appropriate, unless in addition to the pool**

In addition to the arguments detailed above, the "water play-park" (p. 41) proposed to take the place of the swimming pool is inappropriate. The proposal sees the water-play park as an unsupervised recreation facility, linked to the efforts to reduce costs at the Mayfield site. Under such conditions, the water play-park is likely to become a target for graffiti, vandalised, and an unattractive option for parents. If it was included within the pool grounds, perhaps on a smaller scale as an additional, supervised play area, like the graphic used in the PSDM from Darwin (p. 41) which adjoins a public (Council) swimming pool, the concept may be viable. As a replacement for the pool, however, the water play-park will quickly undo the important community building work that the pool facility provides (see below).

### **2. Mayfield Swimming Pool is an important part of the community, and helps build community**

Mayfield Swimming Pool is ideally located in Mayfield, adjoining Dangar Park and the recently completed Skate Park (an initiative supported by the local community and Council, and delivering significant social outcomes for young people). Its location positions it as a central community centre, easily accessible by public transport, with actual and further potential as a social space. At the heart of this space is the swimming pool.

#### **2.1 Mayfield Pool as a healthy community centre**

Mayfield Pool provides children, teenagers and adults with a healthy activity - necessary for physical, social and emotional well-being, and for managing health issues like asthma and obesity. The pool is used by lap swimmers early mornings, by local schools for swimming carnivals, by the Newcastle Swimming Club and by the local community for social swimming. In the summer Mayfield Pool is literally full of children and young people after school, all day on the weekends, and all day during school holidays. The benefits of services like this to communities like Mayfield are significant. In some sense they are immeasurable, at least in simple mathematical or financial terms, though there are measures of healthy communities that services like this clearly, and directly, contribute to.

#### **2.2 Mayfield Pool helps build community**

As a local venue, Mayfield Pool provides people with the opportunity to meet and develop friendships with others who live in the local community. Such spaces are increasingly rare in

contemporary times, despite long-standing public calls to rebuild communities, recreate a 'sense of community', and meet the needs of communities in their local area. As such, the pool helps to develop a supportive and caring community, where members may feel a sense of belonging. Were the pool to be closed, and local residents dispersed to other parts of the city in search of alternative venues, these positive community-building outcomes would be lost. Indeed, as noted below, the associated danger here is that many would not be in a position to access alternative services, with serious social and equity costs.

Mayfield pool functions as a safe (supervised) meeting place / activity centre for older children and teenagers. Taking this away would have extremely negative consequences for these children, and for the whole community.

### **2.3 Mayfield Pool assists in welcoming recently arrived refugees**

Newcastle City Council has taken an important, principled position in welcoming and supporting the settlement of recently arrived refugees to the Newcastle community. The growing Sudanese community is one example that is well represented in the Mayfield area. As Council is well aware, the Sudanese community has experienced significant racism from some sections of the broader community, including children being subjected to racist threats in some recreation areas (e.g. the basketball facilities in Islington Park). Sudanese families have increasingly made use of Mayfield pool, demonstrating the great potential of this facility to bring together parents and children from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, and provide a safe, supervised space for them to get to know each other, and build friendships. The value of such outcomes, for the entire community, is beyond measure.

### **3. There are significant social justice reasons to keep Mayfield Pool Open.**

Ideas of social justice are usually connected to John Rawls' theory of justice, which argues that decisions about the distribution of social and economic goods should give the greatest benefit to the least advantaged sectors of society. If a decision about pool services for the Newcastle LGA is to take such social justice principles into consideration, as Newcastle City Council's actions consistently do, then any case taking away services from Mayfield and its surrounding suburbs falls down. Even if the closure of Mayfield pool was required to make the NA&LC financially viable, which as demonstrated above is doubtful, it fails the most fundamental social justice test.

The consequences of removing services like these from communities like ours are well documented - increases in a wide range of youth social problems. Having made a great positive step with the skate park in Dangar Park, removing the pool would be a backward step.

#### **3.1 Mayfield's demographics**

The history and demographics of Mayfield and its surrounding suburbs are well known by Council, the links to working class history no better symbolised than the construction of the pool by BHP itself to mark 50 years of its activity in Mayfield. While the demographics have begun to change in recent years, driven particularly by the sharp increase in house prices over the last decade, there is little debate that this area continues to deal with social problems associated with high levels of under and unemployment, low-socioeconomic status, etcetera. These are reflected in the rates of people without private transport, for example, which is significantly higher than the LGA average. Similarly,

Mayfield has higher rates of young people, of people receiving disability benefits, of indigenous people, or people born overseas, or recently arrived refugees, than the average for the Newcastle LGA.

The rates referred to above are the types of things that a social impact assessment for a proposal to remove a public facility like the pool would consider as a matter of course. It would also make explicit reference to government policies with respect to equity and social justice. This level of analysis is absent in the draft PSDM report, raising further questions about the validity of its central proposals.

### **3.2 The social costs of closing Mayfield Pool**

If Mayfield pool closed, some who currently use the pool may go the redeveloped NA&LC. Those who do so would be amongst the most mobile, wealthiest sections of the local community that currently use Mayfield Pool. It is likely that many in this sector of the local community already access other, perhaps commercial services which provide swimming and sports / gymnasium facilities. The least mobile (those without private cars) and poorest sections of the community, those without private cars and unable to afford the transport and increased entry costs at alternative venues or the proposed NA&LC, will be the most negatively affected by a decision to close Mayfield Pool.

Of course, many of these are the children who, when it warms up, currently crowd the pool all day during school holidays, and after school and on weekends during school terms. These are the young people in our community who will not be in a position to make the trip to an alternative pool, and certainly not with the regularity with which they currently access Mayfield pool. The outcome here is quite clear and straightforward - the most disadvantaged sectors of our local community will be left without ready access to an affordable, public swimming pool. In basic social justice terms, those most disadvantaged are disadvantaged most.

The closure of this social and community centre would, therefore, impact hardest on some of the most disadvantaged sections of Newcastle's community, in an area already characterised by a relatively low level of public services. The removal of services like this has direct consequences for levels of anti-social behaviour amongst young people who have one less affordable and accessible facility to enjoy. At a deeper level, it adds to young people's sense of alienation from, and cynicism about, government, governance, and the principle of providing public services as social goods. In this case, the high level of public input valuing and supporting the maintenance of Mayfield Pool, including that conducted and reported by the PSDM consultants, exacerbates this negative outcome were the pool to be closed. The clear message within such an outcome is that the public voice is ignored, and hence that consultation is little more than a bureaucratic procedure rather than an authentic opportunity for substantive and meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

### **4. Significant actual and potential benefits of maintaining and improving Mayfield Swimming Pool**

As has been made clear in the SMSP public meetings, and residents' participation in the Council consultation of September 20, Mayfield Swimming Pool currently provides significant benefits to many local communities, which could potentially be strengthened and extended if even relatively minor improvements were made to the pool. These benefits are broadly indicated in the points

above, both in terms of current direct benefits and the costs of the pool's proposed closure. In summary, these benefits include the following:

**A centre for building social capital:** the pool as a community meeting space, supporting the establishment of local friendships which, in turn, build local social capital from the ground up.

**Health benefits:** these extend to young children, teenagers, adults and the elderly. The majority of pool users are children, the bulk of whom walk or ride bikes to the pool from Mayfield and surrounding suburbs. While few may swim laps (other than those involved with the Newcastle Swimming Club which uses the pool), it is the pool that they come to use.

**Social benefits:** Like it or not, the pool acts as a refuge for some young people who can spend a day in a safe, supervised, and enjoyable environment with their peers. It also provides opportunities for young people from diverse cultural backgrounds to meet and get to know each other in their shared use of the pool. Such opportunities clearly exist elsewhere, but the pool is an important one in the warmer months bringing people together in and from the community who may not attend the same school, or belong to the same sporting clubs, etc.

**Community benefits:** All of these things relate to the concept of strengthening a sense of local community, where neighbours and residents get to know each other, support each other, and begin to form a sense of collective ownership of and care about their local surroundings, their immediate environment, their local public services. These benefits are not a nostalgic reference to an imaginary past, as some might try to characterise them. These are real, tangible benefits that have a direct, positive impact on the quality of people's day-to-day lives. In the long term, they benefit us all through the improved quality of civic life and participation. In fact, the level of public interest in, and passion about, this issue is arguably a measure of the benefit that services like Mayfield Pool provide; with people coming together to actively work for their collective community interests.

Many of the proposed additions and improvements to Council Swimming Centres contained in the PSDM Draft 2007 report are welcome. Renovating and updating the aged facilities of Mayfield Pool would indeed be a positive step, as would:

- \* the construction of a community meeting space
- \* an enhanced cafeteria,
- \* more shade areas and better seating,
- \* improved playground facilities for young kids,
- \* the return of learn-to-swim classes,
- \* the possibility of solar heating for the pool, or even converting the whole centre into a solar powered, self-sustaining centre.

Some, or all, of these types of improvements would be well justified on social justice grounds. Provided these improvements are made in consultation with the community, to ensure that we give people what they want, we are confident these sort of improvements would build on the relatively stable rate of recent years and contribute to increased use of the pool. A full examination and modelling of these options for Mayfield, as done for other pools, as part of a strategy to deliver an improved, publicly owned, "swimming" and leisure centre at Mayfield, ought to be a central part of future planning.

## **5. Towards a conclusion**

The conclusion that the Save Mayfield Swimming Pool makes seeks is self-evident. At a minimum we call on Council to reject the proposal to close Mayfield Pool, and instead seek meaningful and ongoing consultation to deliver an enhanced swimming pool / community centre that will consolidate and improve the significant social benefits that are not immediately apparent in financial statements. We have set out clear arguments for rejecting the PSDM proposal to close Mayfield pool in its own terms, which are compelling in their own right. In addition, we have highlighted additional community service and social justice perspectives that, while missing from the PSDM report, demonstrate the critical need to keep Mayfield Swimming Pool operating.

Many of us question the validity of pure economic analysis of the type used in the PSDM report, particularly when applied to the provision of public services, be it swimming pools, libraries, art galleries, ocean baths, etcetera. The language of "subsidised visits" emphasised in the reporting and presentation of the PSDM encourages a sort of populist critique of public facilities, as though the masses were subsidising an activity that only a small elite made use of. We think this should be resisted, in all instances, and the general social good that such services provide promoted at every opportunity.

Many of us recognise the financial pressures that local Councils are experiencing generally, and support efforts to address this by increasing Council income in order to maintain and improve services. Some of us might be prepared to work with Council to advance such issues with State and Federal governments, and with the local community, to achieve lasting solutions.

In the meantime, however, we conclude by emphasising that the recommendation to close Mayfield Pool is the wrong conclusion. Closing the pool would be a bad decision, bad politics, based on bad logic, with major costs to the current and future health and well-being of the Mayfield and surrounding community. Based on the analysis in the PSDM report, the views of the local community, and the broader analyses provided here, we emphatically urge Council officers and councillors to reject this recommendation and work to keep Mayfield Swimming Pool open and operational, as an important, central community centre, for future generations.

### **Appendix 1. Powerpoint Presentation: "The Mayfield Olympic Swimming Pool"**

(Prepared by Mr Gianni Di Gravio, Archivist, University of Newcastle)

### **Appendix 2. 91 pages of Petitions with 2150 Signatures to Save Mayfield Swimming Pool**