

Five city pools reopen, much to kids' relief

By Nick Madigan, *The Baltimore Sun*, August 11, 2010

When officials closed most of the city's public swimming pools on Sunday, the homeless children who attend a summer camp in Patterson Park were left without the most crucial — and most fun — part of their daily activities. Some resorted to tantrums.

"They were like, dying, throwing water on themselves with bottles," said Danielle Veney, a 15-year-old counselor at Camp St. Vincent. "They were flipping out because they didn't have the pool."

But on Wednesday, the campers were once again splashing and shrieking in the park's pool, one of five to reopen at noon thanks to a \$117,000 donation to the city from the T. Rowe Price Foundation and \$300,000 from an unidentified donor.

The gifts will allow the Cherry Hill, Roosevelt, Patterson Park, Riverside and Clifton Park pools to stay open through Labor Day, Sept. 6. Another \$177,000 would cover the cost of reopening an additional 13 small, neighborhood pools for the next month, and cash-strapped city officials made clear that they were receptive to more donations.

"In a year when the City is facing serious budgetary challenges, it is refreshing to see that Baltimore business leaders are willing to take concrete action," Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake said in a statement. She described the \$300,000 donor simply as "a major Baltimore City individual."

The two gifts were the latest reprieve for city pools, which were scheduled to have a shortened season because of the city's budget problems. On Monday, a Baltimore company, Grant Capital Management, gave \$90,000 to keep Druid Hill Park's pool open until Labor Day. The city's three indoor pools remain in use all year around.

The reopening of the five park pools on Wednesday came as a surprise to a half-dozen City Council members who had gathered at the City Springs Pool in Washington Hill for a morning news conference. They hoped to pressure Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake to free up money from the administration's rainy-day fund, which they estimated holds some \$80 million.

"Enough cash to fill each of the city's closed pools with \$100 bills," said Bernard C. "Jack" Young, the City Council president.

But even as Young spoke — and unbeknownst to him and his colleagues — the mayor's office was releasing a statement to the news media revealing the latest donations and the plan to open the pools at noon, just minutes away. The two gifts had been offered quietly earlier in the week but were awaiting "official confirmation," the mayor's press secretary said after the pools had reopened.

"We didn't want to make an announcement until the ink was dry," said Ian T. Brennan, the spokesman. Still, the deal had seemed like such a sure thing that on Tuesday, the mayor's office instructed the Department of Recreation and Parks to stop draining the closed pools, a process that had begun on Sunday.

Before announcing the reopenings, Brennan said, parks officials also wanted to make sure they could recall teams of lifeguards and pool attendants so soon after letting them go. They also had to restore an adequate level of security.

While news about the reprieve for the park pools was welcome, 13 so-called walk-to pools remain closed. Unless a donor quickly comes up with the \$177,000 required to reopen those small, neighborhood pools through Labor Day, Young intends to press ahead with an emergency council meeting Friday to consider a resolution that would urge Rawlings-Blake to tap the rainy-day fund.

Councilman William H. Cole IV complicated the debate Wednesday afternoon, saying that he too had a plan for the 13 pools, a proposal that will have a familiar ring to his colleagues. Cole, a close ally of the mayor, said he would introduce a bill Friday that would double the city's bottle tax to 4 cents, and that potential proceeds — estimated at more than \$5 million — could be used to keep the pools open and to create a dedicated revenue stream for recreation and parks.

The bottle tax was the most contentious element of a \$50 million package of taxes and fees proposed by Rawlings-Blake this year to help bridge the city's \$121 million budget gap. A 4-cent tax proposed by the mayor was killed by a tie council vote, and the 2-cent tax was passed after last-minute lobbying by the administration. The tax went into effect late last month.

Cole proposes diverting the funds garnered from an increased tax to recreation and parks, a plan that was not on the table when the 4-cent proposal was introduced in the spring.

"We have been in a situation where every year during budget time, the city has been looking at cutting from recreation and parks," said Cole. "Let's fix the problem now, but let's also create a fund for recreation and parks to tap into in the future."

Cole was hopeful that the council would pass the higher tax. "Given the response we've heard this week," he said, "the pools are a very important issue."

That would be an understatement to people such as Kinji Scott, executive director of Citizens for Washington Hill, a community organization in the city's southeast.

"This is probably one of our most vital resources," he said Wednesday, pointing to the modestly sized City Springs Pool on East Baltimore Street, still brimming with water but otherwise empty.

"We are surrounded by a lot of public housing — thousands of people," he added. "You almost have to turn kids away. There are way too many kids to be on the street."

Meanwhile, at the Patterson Park pool, Kira Kartseva, who is visiting Baltimore from Kiev, Ukraine, on a summer exchange program, was enjoying her swim. She had been told about the pool's closing, but she and a friend dropped by Wednesday and were surprised to find it had reopened. "The water's perfect," she said.

Baltimore Sun reporter Julie Scharper contributed to this article.