



Innovative
Public Advisors

**Symons Recreation Complex
Operational Structure Assessment**

March 3, 2026

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Executive Summary

The Symons Recreation Complex has served as a cornerstone of health, wellness, and community connection for the City of Richland Center, Richland County, and the surrounding region since its establishment in 1987. For nearly four decades, Symons has functioned as the community's primary indoor aquatic and fitness facility, providing access to swim lessons, aquatic fitness, lap swimming, and wellness opportunities for residents of all ages. With 2,000 active members and 70,000 annual visits, the facility plays a central role in daily life for many residents while also serving as an important regional asset.

Symons' longevity, strong membership base, and history of philanthropic involvement reflect both its community value and the sustained commitment to keeping the facility accessible and affordable. Survey results, interviews, and public engagement consistently confirm that Symons is highly regarded, well used, and widely supported. Aquatic programming, in particular, is viewed as an essential service, and satisfaction levels among members and the broader community are strong.

Survey data provide measurable confirmation of Symons' community value. Among community respondents, 89.9% consider the facility important, including 76.6% who rated it "Very Important." Among active members, 98.7% consider Symons important, with 95.9% selecting "Very Important." Overall satisfaction levels are strong (73.0% community and 93.1% members), and staff hospitality received the highest service ratings of any category (91.7% satisfaction among members). These findings confirm that Symons is not facing a crisis of relevance or demand. Rather, it faces structural and financial pressures associated with aging infrastructure, levy constraints, and long-term capital responsibility.

At the same time, Symons is a mature facility operating in an increasingly complex financial and operational environment. Rising staffing, utility, and maintenance costs, combined with aging building systems and infrastructure, have placed growing pressure on annual budgets and long-term capital planning. The facility's current governance and funding structure—developed incrementally over time—has allowed Symons to operate successfully but was not designed to fully address the long-term realities of reinvestment, risk

allocation, and financial sustainability. These challenges are further shaped by levy limits, competing public priorities, and the expiration of the current intergovernmental agreement in 2027.

In response, the City of Richland Center and Richland County engaged Innovative Public Advisors (IPA) to conduct a comprehensive operational, governance, and sustainability study of the Symons Recreation Complex. This report presents an objective assessment of current conditions and outlines a range of operational and ownership models for consideration, with the goal of preserving what the community values most about Symons while identifying a more sustainable long-term financial and governance model that positions the facility for continued viability and success.

Study Approach

IPA conducted the study using a phased, engagement-driven approach that combined technical analysis with extensive community and stakeholder input. The process included facility and site visits, interviews with elected officials, City and County staff, Foundation representatives, and facility leadership, stakeholder workshops, and peer facility comparisons. Six comparable aquatic and recreation facilities were reviewed to understand how similarly sized communities structure ownership, management, staffing, and funding.

Public engagement was a central component of the study. IPA administered a statistically relevant community survey using registered voter contact information supplemented by public outreach, as well as a separate member survey targeting current Symons users. These tools were supported by a public information session and a dedicated project microsite to ensure transparency and accessibility throughout the process.

Community and Member Survey Results

Survey participation was strong and consistent across both community members and active users. Results from both surveys clearly demonstrate that the Symons Recreation Complex is highly valued and viewed as an essential community asset. Respondents consistently cited affordability, accessibility, aquatic amenities, programming variety, quality staffing, and the welcoming nature of the facility as key strengths.

Importantly, survey results also reveal a shared understanding that maintaining the status quo indefinitely is not realistic. While respondents expressed a strong desire to preserve the core mission and community character of Symons, there was broad acknowledgment that changes to governance, funding, or partnerships may be necessary to ensure long-term sustainability. Both community members and facility users showed a willingness to support future investment and fundraising efforts, provided that affordability, access, and local accountability are maintained.

Key Findings

The study confirmed that Symons is well-managed, cost-efficient relative to peer facilities, and strongly supported by its community. Leadership and staff commitment were repeatedly identified as strengths, and peer comparisons showed that Symons operates with a relatively modest public subsidy compared to similar facilities. **However, the subsidy continues to place financial pressure on the City's operating budget, particularly given competing priorities and the constraints created by levy limits.**

The analysis also identified structural challenges that will intensify over time if left unaddressed. These include deferred maintenance and capital needs, reliance on limited levy funding, and uncertainty around long-term ownership and capital responsibility. Peer facility analysis reinforced that no comparable facility operates without some form of public support, philanthropic investment, or diversified revenue model.

Survey results, interviews, and peer data consistently point to the same conclusion: long-term sustainability will require governance to be revisited, stronger alignment of roles and responsibilities, and a funding model that reduces vulnerability to future fiscal constraints.

Evaluation of Operational Models

IPA evaluated multiple operational and governance models, including continued public ownership, modified public or shared-service approaches, nonprofit ownership or management, and hybrid partnership structures. Each model was assessed using criteria informed directly by community and member priorities, including affordability, accountability, financial sustainability, operational flexibility, and protection of core services.

The evaluation demonstrated that successful long-term outcomes depend less on a specific ownership label and more on how clearly responsibilities, funding mechanisms, and capital obligations are defined. Models that diversify revenue sources, strengthen philanthropic capacity, and reduce reliance on constrained public funding consistently aligned more closely with survey results and peer facility best practices.

Recommendations and Implementation Strategy

This report presents a set of observations and recommendations designed to protect the community value of the Symons Recreation Complex while positioning it for long-term sustainability. These recommendations are paired with an implementation strategy that outlines practical next steps, sequencing considerations, and roles for the City, County, Foundation, and community partners.

While the Symons Recreation Complex remains a valued community asset, the current governance and funding structure places a significant share of the long-term financial responsibility on the City's property tax levy. Given competing municipal priorities and the constraints created by levy limits, maintaining this structure indefinitely may become increasingly challenging. A key principle reflected in the recommendations is the transition toward an operational and governance model that broadens financial responsibility beyond the City's general levy—potentially through partnerships with other governmental entities, nonprofit leadership structures, or other collaborative arrangements—ensuring the facility remains sustainable while allowing the City to responsibly manage long-term fiscal pressures and maintain capacity for other core municipal services.

Study Background, Purpose, and Methodology

The Symons Recreation Complex has served Richland Center, Richland County, and the surrounding region for nearly four decades as a community-centered facility focused on health, wellness, recreation, and social connection. Over time, Symons has evolved into a valued asset with a strong membership base, diverse programming, and deep philanthropic roots that reflect sustained community investment and support.

Like many community recreation facilities of similar age and scale, Symons now faces a convergence of long-term pressures. These include aging infrastructure, increasing operational and capital costs, constrained public funding capacity, and growing expectations for programming, accessibility, and facility quality. While the facility continues to operate successfully day to day, these pressures prompted City and County leaders to step back and intentionally evaluate whether the current governance, funding, and operational structure is positioned to support Symons over the long term.

This study was initiated as a proactive planning effort to ensure that future decisions are informed, deliberate, and aligned with community values.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the current operational, governance, and funding structure of the Symons Recreation Complex and to identify viable pathways that support long-term sustainability while preserving the facility's core mission, affordability, and community character.

Specifically, the study was designed to:

- Assess existing conditions, including facility operations, staffing, governance, and financial performance.
- Gather broad and meaningful input from community members, facility users, staff, elected officials, and key partners.
- Evaluate alternative ownership and operational models used by comparable communities.
- Analyze financial and sustainability implications associated with each model.
- Provide clear, actionable recommendations and an Implementation Strategy to guide future decision-making.

This study does not presuppose a single preferred outcome. Instead, it is intended to equip local leaders with the information, analysis, and community context necessary to make informed decisions about the future of the Symons Recreation Complex.

Study Scope

The scope of the study focused on governance, operations, and long-term sustainability rather than facility expansion or detailed architectural design. While capital needs and facility condition were considered at a high level, the study emphasizes organizational structure, funding mechanisms, and operational responsibility as the primary drivers of long-term success. The study examined:

- Current ownership, governance, and staffing structures.
- Operating revenues, expenses, and subsidy levels.
- Capital responsibilities and long-term financial exposure.
- Peer facility models and best practices.
- Community expectations and priorities related to affordability, access, and services.

Methodology

Innovative Public Advisors (IPA) employed a multi-phased, engagement-driven methodology that integrated technical analysis with extensive qualitative and quantitative input. The methodology was designed to ensure transparency, inclusivity, and practical relevance. Key components of the methodology included:

- **Project Initiation and Coordination:** IPA facilitated a project kick-off meeting and conversations with City, County, and facility leadership to confirm goals, roles, timelines, and deliverables. Early coordination established a shared understanding of study objectives and expectations.
- **Document Review and Data Analysis:** IPA reviewed relevant background documents, agreements, financial information, and prior planning materials and survey responses to establish a baseline understanding of existing conditions and policy context.
- **Interviews and Stakeholder Input:** IPA conducted numerous interviews with elected officials, City and County staff (Symons and campus), Foundation representatives, facility leadership, community members, and key partners to capture first-hand operational insight, institutional knowledge, and unique perspectives.
- **Community and Member Surveys:** Two distinct surveys were administered: a community survey targeting County residents through registered voter outreach and public promotion, and a member survey focused on current facility users. Together, these surveys provided insight into community values, usage patterns, priorities, and openness to future change.
- **Stakeholder Workshops and Public Engagement:** Facilitated stakeholder workshops and a public information session provided opportunities for dialogue, clarification, and feedback. A dedicated public project microsite supported transparency and ongoing access to project information.
- **Peer Facility Comparison:** IPA conducted site visits and comparative reviews of six peer aquatic and recreation facilities serving Wisconsin communities of similar size and regional role. These comparisons provided practical context for evaluating alternative governance and operational models.
- **Synthesis and Evaluation:** Findings from engagement, financial analysis, and peer review were synthesized to evaluate operational models using consistent criteria, including sustainability, accountability, affordability, and alignment with community priorities.



Community and Stakeholder Engagement

Meaningful and inclusive engagement was a central component of this study. Innovative Public Advisors (IPA) designed and implemented a multi-layered engagement strategy to ensure that community members, facility users, staff, elected officials, and key partners had multiple opportunities to provide input and inform the evaluation of future operational and governance options for the Symons Recreation Complex.

The engagement process was intentionally structured to capture both broad community sentiment and detailed, experience-based feedback from those most closely connected to the facility.

Engagement Objectives

The engagement process was guided by the following objectives:

- To understand how the Symons Recreation Complex is used and valued by the broader community.
- To identify priorities, concerns, and non-negotiables related to affordability, access, and services.
- To assess openness to change and potential future governance or partnership models.
- To incorporate institutional knowledge from staff, partners, and long-standing supporters.
- To ensure transparency and build trust throughout the study process.



Stakeholder Interviews

IPA conducted numerous one-on-one and small-group interviews with key stakeholders, including elected officials, City and County administrative staff, Symons leadership and staff, and members from both Foundations. These interviews provided important qualitative context related to facility history, governance structure, staffing capacity, financials, and long-term capital responsibility. Interview themes consistently emphasized the importance of preserving Symons' community character while acknowledging that structural and financial changes may be necessary to ensure long-term sustainability.



Stakeholder Workshops and Working Sessions

IPA facilitated structured stakeholder workshops to validate observations, explore operational tradeoffs, and test assumptions associated with different governance and ownership models. Participants discussed current strengths, emerging challenges, and the values that should guide future decision-making. Workshop discussions reinforced the importance of clarity around roles and responsibilities, long-term capital planning, and maintaining affordability and access regardless of future structural changes.

Community Survey Results

IPA administered a community-wide survey to gather input from residents across Richland County and the City of Richland Center. A total of 308 community members completed the survey, providing a robust dataset reflective of community perspectives. Key findings from the community survey include:

- 76.6% of respondents indicated that having the Symons Recreation Complex in Richland Center is important or very important to them.
- 73.1% of respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the facility overall.
- Respondents most frequently cited the aquatic facilities, affordability, and community atmosphere as key strengths.
- While some respondents reported infrequent personal use, many still identified Symons as an important community asset.
- Written comments reflected strong support for preserving the facility while recognizing concerns related to aging infrastructure, locker rooms, and long-term funding.

Overall, the community survey demonstrates broad support for Symons as a valued public asset, including among residents who are not regular users of the facility.

Member Survey Results

In addition to the community survey, IPA administered a targeted survey of current Symons members and users (see *Appendix A*). A total of 145 members participated, providing detailed insight from individuals with direct, ongoing experience using the facility.

Key findings from the member survey include:

- 95.9% of respondents indicated that having the Symons Recreation Complex in Richland Center is important or very important to them.
- 93.1% of respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the facility overall.
- Members reported frequent use, with a majority indicating weekly or daily visits.
- Aquatics, fitness facilities, and programming variety were consistently identified as the most valued services.

Member comments emphasized appreciation for staff, affordability, and the welcoming environment, alongside concerns about locker room conditions, maintenance, and long-term facility investment. Member responses highlight strong loyalty to Symons and a clear desire to see the facility maintained and improved over time.

Public Information Session

IPA hosted a public information and input session to explain the purpose of the study, summarize the engagement process, and provide an open forum for questions and feedback. Input received during the session was consistent with survey findings, reinforcing the importance of affordability, access, and transparency as future decisions are considered.



Public Project Microsite

IPA developed and maintained a dedicated public project microsite throughout the study to support transparency and engagement. The microsite served as a central location for project updates, survey access, meeting information, and study background materials, and played a key role in supporting survey participation and public awareness.



Symons Recreation Complex

The City of Richland Center and Richland County are partnering with *Integrative Public Advisors (IPA)* to evaluate and plan for the long-term sustainability of the Symons Recreational Complex—a valued community asset. Through a structured, collaborative process, IPA is guiding City and County leaders, partners, and community stakeholders in assessing current operations and exploring future governance and operational models that enhance services while addressing fiscal realities.

Over the course of the project, IPA is engaging the public and key stakeholders, conducting operational and financial analyses, and leading working sessions with City, County, and partner organizations. This approach ensures public perspectives are incorporated alongside peer facility analysis to develop clear, data-informed options for the future operation and management of the Symons Recreational Complex.

Richland Center will receive actionable recommendations and an implementation-focused strategy that supports informed decision-making, strengthens partnerships, and positions the Symons Recreational Complex for long-term financial sustainability and continued community benefits.

Summary of Engagement Outcomes

Across all engagement activities, the data clearly demonstrate that the Symons Recreation Complex is highly valued by both the broader community and active users. Satisfaction levels are strong, particularly among members, and there is widespread recognition of Symons as an important community asset.

At the same time, survey responses, interviews, and workshop discussions reflect an understanding that long-term sustainability will require thoughtful planning and potential changes to governance, funding, or partnerships. The community and members expressed a willingness to support change when it is clearly explained, aligned with community values, and implemented in a way that preserves affordability, access, and local accountability. These engagement outcomes directly informed the evaluation of operational models and the recommendations presented later in this report.





Existing Conditions Assessment

The following section summarizes the current operational, organizational, and financial conditions of the Symons Recreation Complex. This assessment is based on site visits, facility condition review, document analysis, stakeholder interviews, survey results, and direct observation. It establishes a factual baseline for evaluating future operational and ownership options. A comprehensive SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis is included as [Appendix B](#).

Facility Overview and Amenities

The Symons Recreation Complex is a multi-purpose aquatic and fitness facility serving residents of the City of Richland Center, Richland County, and the surrounding region. Established in 1987, Symons has served for more than three decades as the community's primary indoor aquatic and wellness facility.

The facility includes:

- Indoor pool facilities that support lap swimming, water fitness, swim lessons, and recreational use.
- Fitness and wellness spaces, including cardio and weight training areas.
- Program and support spaces used for classes, instruction, and community activities.
- Locker rooms, circulation areas, and building systems necessary to support daily operations.

Symons currently serves approximately 2,000 active members and 70,000 annual visits, with aquatics representing the primary driver of participation. Survey responses and interviews consistently confirm that swimming, water fitness, and lessons are the most valued services provided at the facility and the primary reason members join and continue to use Symons.

A recent facility condition assessment confirms that while the building remains operational and safe for use, it is a mature facility with aging mechanical, pool, and building systems. As with most facilities of this age, capital needs are expected to increase over time and will require intentional planning.

Programming and Usage

Symons offers a range of programming intended to serve diverse community needs, including youth, adults, seniors, and families. Programs include swim lessons, aquatic fitness classes, lap swimming, open swim, and fitness-related activities.

Key observations related to programming and usage include:

- Strong and consistent participation in aquatic programming.
- Regular use by members who visit weekly or daily, particularly for fitness and water-based activities.
- Continued relevance to non-members who may not use the facility frequently but still value its availability as a community resource.

Survey data show high satisfaction among both community respondents and active members, reinforcing that current programming aligns well with user expectations. At the same time, feedback indicates growing expectations related to facility condition, cleanliness, and modernization of certain spaces.

Governance and Organizational Structure

The Symons Recreation Complex operates under a shared public governance framework involving the City of Richland Center and Richland County, with additional involvement from the Symons Board. Ownership, operational responsibility, and financial obligations are distributed across multiple entities through formal agreements.

Key characteristics of the current governance structure include:

- Shared public ownership and oversight by the City and County.
- Annual operating support tied to levy-limited public budgets.
- County employment of facility staff for payroll, benefits, and personnel administration.
- Philanthropic involvement that has historically supported both capital investment and operations.
- An intergovernmental agreement governing operations that is scheduled to expire in 2027.

While this structure has enabled Symons to operate successfully, interviews and document review indicate that it evolved incrementally rather than being intentionally designed as a long-term operating model. Decision-making authority, capital responsibility, and long-term risk allocation are not clearly defined, particularly as the facility ages and capital needs grow.

Staffing and Operations

Symons is managed by a dedicated staff team responsible for daily operations, programming, customer service, and facility maintenance. Leadership and staff were consistently cited in surveys and interviews as a major strength of the organization. Operational observations include:

- Strong institutional knowledge and commitment among staff.
- Lean staffing relative to the scope of services provided.
- Heavy reliance on key individuals to manage operations, programming, and facility needs.
- Limited redundancy in staffing roles, which can create operational vulnerability.

Peer facility comparisons later in this report provide additional context for staffing levels and organizational capacity relative to similarly sized facilities.

Financial Snapshot

From an operating perspective, the Symons Recreation Complex performed stronger than originally budgeted in 2025. Total operating revenues were \$495,504.93, compared to total operating expenses of \$478,333.81, resulting in a positive year-end operating result of approximately \$17,171.

Operating revenues exceeded budget expectations and were driven primarily by earned income sources:

- Membership Fees: \$299,573.16
- Program and Class Fees: \$34,451.50
- Day Passes: \$31,372.56
- City of Richland Center Levy Support: \$53,960.41
- Richland County Levy Support: \$53,960.40
- Special Events: \$12,092.23
- Merchandise Sales: \$3,644.99
- FOB Key Access: \$6,024.77

Membership revenue remains the single largest revenue source, accounting for approximately 60% of total operating income.

Total operating expenses were \$478,333.81. Expenses continue to be largely driven by personnel and facility-related costs:

- Personnel-related costs: approximately \$342,000 (including regular and casual wages, payroll taxes, retirement, and insurance contributions).
- Utilities (lights and heat): approximately \$57,600.

- Maintenance, repairs, and pool supplies: approximately \$46,000.
- Remaining expenses included insurance, professional services, snow plowing, supplies, advertising, and administrative costs.

As is typical for indoor aquatic facilities, labor and utilities represent the largest expense categories.

Financial Position

While 2025 closed with a modest operating surplus, the margin remains structurally narrow relative to the scale of operations. Aquatic facilities are inherently cost-intensive, and annual performance can fluctuate based on program enrollment, staffing levels, utility pricing, and unexpected repairs.

Importantly, the operating budget does not fully account for long-term capital reinvestment needs. As identified in the facility condition assessment, Symons will require increasing investment in building systems, pool infrastructure, and interior/exterior finishes as the facility continues to age. These capital obligations represent a growing long-term financial consideration beyond annual operating results.

Survey feedback continues to affirm that affordability is central to Symons' community value, limiting the degree to which future financial pressures can be addressed through fee increases alone.

Summary of Existing Conditions

Overall, the Symons Recreation Complex remains a well-used and strongly supported community facility. Its aquatic-centered services continue to generate steady membership participation and broad community engagement.

At the same time, the assessment confirms that short-term operational success does not eliminate long-term structural risk. As a facility established in 1987 with aging infrastructure, limited capital reserves, and a governance structure approaching a strategic decision point, Symons faces increasing pressure to clarify long-term ownership, funding commitments, and capital responsibility.

These existing conditions form the foundation for the peer facility comparison and operational model evaluation that follow.



Peer Facility Comparison

Innovative Public Advisors (IPA) conducted a structured peer facility comparison to inform the evaluation of future governance, ownership, and operational models for the Symons Recreation Complex. The purpose of this effort was to understand how similarly sized communities operate and sustain aquatic and recreation facilities under real-world conditions, rather than to identify a single preferred model.

Six peer facilities were selected based on community size, regional role, facility mix, and relevance to the challenges facing Symons. The facilities represent a range of ownership and governance structures, including municipal, school district, nonprofit, and hybrid models. Each facility illustrates different approaches to funding, staffing, capital investment, and community partnerships.

IPA conducted site visits and interviews with facility leadership at each location, supplemented by document review and follow-up discussions. To ensure consistency, each facility was evaluated using the same set of criteria, including ownership and governance structure, operating model and staffing, annual operating budget and subsidy levels, capital funding approach, membership structure and pricing, and the role of philanthropy or partnerships.

Each peer facility is presented in a standardized profile later in this section. The profiles focus on factual information and operational context, allowing readers to compare facilities across key dimensions quickly and consistently.

Peer facilities operate within unique local contexts, and direct one-to-one comparison is not always possible. Accordingly, the peer review is intended to highlight patterns, tradeoffs, and practical considerations that inform the operational model evaluation presented later in this report.

Peer Facility Profile: Bloomer Area Aquatic and Recreation Center (Bloomer, Wisconsin)



Community Context and Facility Origin

The Bloomer Area Aquatic & Recreation Center serves the City of Bloomer (population 3,600) and surrounding rural communities. The facility opened in 2010 following years of community planning. Development was catalyzed by a \$1.25 million lead donation from the Pecha family in 2007, which led to the formation of a community board and a successful private capital campaign. All construction costs were privately funded, allowing the facility to open debt-free with an initial operating reserve of approximately \$225,000.

Facility Description and Amenities

The facility encompasses approximately 18,000 square feet and includes warm-water aquatic and fitness amenities. Aquatic features consist of a six-lane pool maintained at approximately 87 degrees and a shallow-water area used for lessons and recreation. Non-aquatic amenities include a 24/7 fitness center, two fitness classrooms, and a meeting and party room. The size and amenity mix are comparable to the Symons Recreation Complex.

Ownership and Governance Structure

The facility is owned and operated by a nonprofit organization structured as a 501(c)(3) and governed by a nine-member Board of Directors. The nonprofit operates independently from city or county government and the school district, resulting in full board responsibility for governance, finances, capital investment, and long-term sustainability.

Operating Model and Staffing

The facility operates with an annual budget of approximately \$350,000 and has no full-time benefited employees. The Director and Office Administrator each work approximately 32 hours per week. Staffing also includes a part-time Aquatics Director, approximately 28 lifeguards and instructors, and several high school students supporting cleaning and front desk functions. Leadership noted that while this model controls costs, it relies heavily on a small number of individuals and presents succession planning challenges.

Financial Performance and Subsidy

Operating revenues are generated through memberships, swim lessons, classes, rentals, and fundraising. The facility does not receive a municipal operating subsidy. Approximately \$80,000 in annual revenue is generated through rental agreements with local organizations, and an additional \$70,000 is raised annually through community fundraising activities. Capital projects are planned in advance and funded through targeted fundraising efforts.

Membership, Pricing, and Usage

The facility serves approximately 900 members. Annual adult memberships for combined pool and fitness access are approximately \$600, with family memberships priced at approximately \$840. Fitness-only and pool-only options are available. Usage is driven primarily by aquatics and fitness programming, including approximately 2,300 swim lessons annually, with partnerships supporting summer swim instruction for local school districts.

Role of Philanthropy and Partnerships

Philanthropy was foundational to the facility's development and continues to support operations and capital needs. Ongoing support includes rental partnerships, community fundraising, and the Friends of the Pool/Swim with Tim Fund, which generates approximately \$30,000 annually. Leadership emphasized that sustained fundraising remains essential to long-term viability.

Key Observations and Considerations

The facility benefits from strong community support, operational independence, and a right-sized design. However, the nonprofit ownership model concentrates financial and operational risk within the organization, requiring continuous fundraising and disciplined cost control. Leadership succession and long-term sustainability were identified as ongoing challenges. The Bloomer model illustrates both the flexibility and financial pressure associated with fully independent nonprofit ownership.



Peer Facility Profile: Lunda Community Center (Black River Falls, Wisconsin)



Community Context and Facility Origin

The Lunda Community Center serves the City of Black River Falls (population 3,585) and the surrounding region. The facility opened in 2015 and was made possible through a substantial charitable gift from the Lunda family, which established a long-term endowment to support operations. The project was envisioned as a regional community asset offering aquatic, fitness, and wellness amenities in a rural market.

Facility Description and Amenities

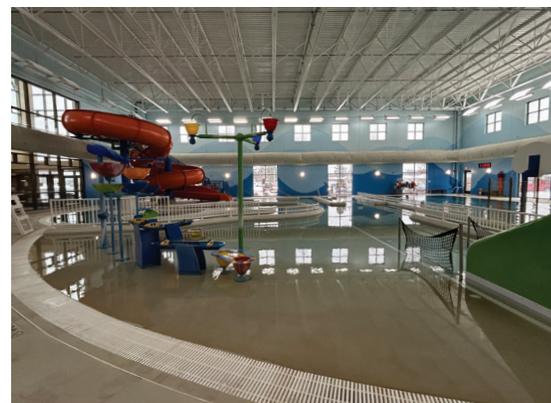
The facility encompasses approximately 113,000 square feet and includes a large aquatic component alongside fitness and community spaces. Aquatic amenities include a zero-depth entry leisure pool, lap pool, hot tub, sauna, and steam room. Non-aquatic amenities include a full fitness center, indoor walking track, gymnasium, group exercise rooms, and community meeting spaces. The scale and amenity mix position the facility as a regional destination rather than a neighborhood facility and is larger than Symons.

Ownership and Governance Structure

The Lunda Community Center is owned and operated by a nonprofit organization governed by a volunteer board. The nonprofit maintains full responsibility for operations, staffing, capital planning, and long-term sustainability. Governance authority is centralized within the nonprofit structure, supported by formal policies and long-term financial planning tied to the endowment.

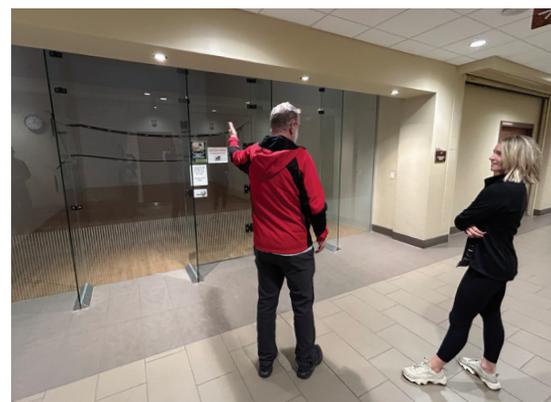
Operating Model and Staffing

The facility operates with an annual budget supported in part by investment income from the Lunda endowment. Staffing includes a full-time Executive Director, program managers, maintenance staff, and a large pool of part-time and seasonal employees. Leadership indicated that while staffing levels are higher than at smaller facilities, the scale of the building requires consistent investment in operations and maintenance.



Financial Performance and Subsidy

Operating revenues are generated through memberships, program fees, rentals, and endowment support. The endowment provides a stable annual subsidy that allows the facility to operate without direct municipal funding while maintaining affordable membership rates. Capital repairs and long-term reinvestment are supported through a combination of endowment planning and targeted fundraising.



Membership, Pricing, and Usage

The facility serves approximately 3,000 members, reflecting its regional draw. Membership pricing is intentionally set below market rates, supported in part by endowment funding. Annual memberships are \$350 for adults and \$490 for families. Usage is strong across aquatics, fitness, and group programming, with the aquatic facilities serving as a primary driver of visitation.



Role of Philanthropy and Partnerships

Philanthropy plays a foundational and ongoing role through the Lunda endowment. This long-term funding source significantly reduces financial risk and provides stability that is uncommon among comparable facilities. Leadership emphasized that this model is highly effective but dependent on a rare philanthropic circumstance.

Key Observations and Considerations

The Lunda model demonstrates the advantages of nonprofit ownership paired with a permanent funding source. While operationally stable, the model is difficult to replicate without a similar endowment and should be viewed as an outlier rather than a typical nonprofit approach.



Peer Facility Profile: Cambridge Community Activities Program (Cambridge, Wisconsin)



Community Context and Facility Origin

Since 1998, the Cambridge Community Activities Program has served the Village of Cambridge (population 1,700) and surrounding area. The program evolved over time through collaboration between the Village, School District, and community partners to expand recreational offerings without constructing a standalone municipal facility.

Facility Description and Amenities

Programming occurs within school district-owned facilities, including a 12,000 square foot pool and 2,500 square foot fitness center. Amenities include gymnasiums, fitness spaces, aquatic access through partnerships, and program rooms used for classes and activities. This distributed model reduces capital investment while expanding community access.

Ownership and Governance Structure

Facilities are owned by the Cambridge School District, while programming and operations are managed by a nonprofit organization. The nonprofit operates under formal agreements with the School District and relies on School District Fund 80 support. Governance responsibilities are shared, with the nonprofit overseeing operations and the School District retaining facility ownership.

Operating Model and Staffing

The program operates with a modest annual budget supported by Fund 80 dollars, program fees, and limited fundraising. Staffing includes a full-time Director and program supervisors. Leadership described the model as efficient but highly dependent on continued School District support and collaboration.

Financial Performance and Subsidy

Fund 80 support provides the primary operating subsidy, allowing programs to break even while maintaining low participant fees. Capital maintenance responsibilities remain with the School District, reducing financial risk for the nonprofit.

Membership, Pricing, and Usage

Participation levels are strong relative to the community's size (235 members), with programming intentionally designed to serve youth, adults, and seniors. Pricing is structured to encourage broad community access, and membership rates are residency-based. Annual aquatic memberships range from \$185–\$245 for residents and \$215–\$275 for nonresidents. Annual fitness center fees are \$200 for adults and \$250 for families.

Role of Philanthropy and Partnerships

Philanthropy plays a limited role, with the model relying more heavily on public funding and intergovernmental cooperation. Partnerships with the School District are critical to success.

Key Observations and Considerations

The Cambridge model demonstrates a low-capital, partnership-based approach that expands recreation access while minimizing financial exposure. Its success depends on strong intergovernmental relationships and is less applicable to facilities with significant physical infrastructure.



Peer Facility Profile: TAG Center (Mayville, Wisconsin)



Community Context and Facility Origin

The TAG Center serves the City of Mayville (population 5,200). The facility opened in 2002 following significant philanthropic investment, which reduced upfront public costs and enabled construction of a modern recreation center.

Facility Description and Amenities

The 46,000 square foot facility includes an aquatic center, fitness spaces, group exercise rooms, childcare, and recreational programming areas. The building was designed to be a comprehensive community recreation hub.

Ownership and Governance Structure

The TAG Center is owned and operated by the City of Mayville. Governance authority rests with the City, with staff responsible for daily operations and reporting through municipal administrative channels.

Operating Model and Staffing

The facility operates with a combination of full-time and part-time staff, including a Director, program coordinators, lifeguards, and maintenance personnel. Leadership indicated that staffing levels are lean relative to the size of the facility.

Financial Performance and Subsidy

The facility operates near break-even with an annual city subsidy of approximately \$165,000. While philanthropic contributions supported construction, ongoing operations rely on public funding and earned revenue. Capital needs are addressed through municipal budgeting.



Membership, Pricing, and Usage

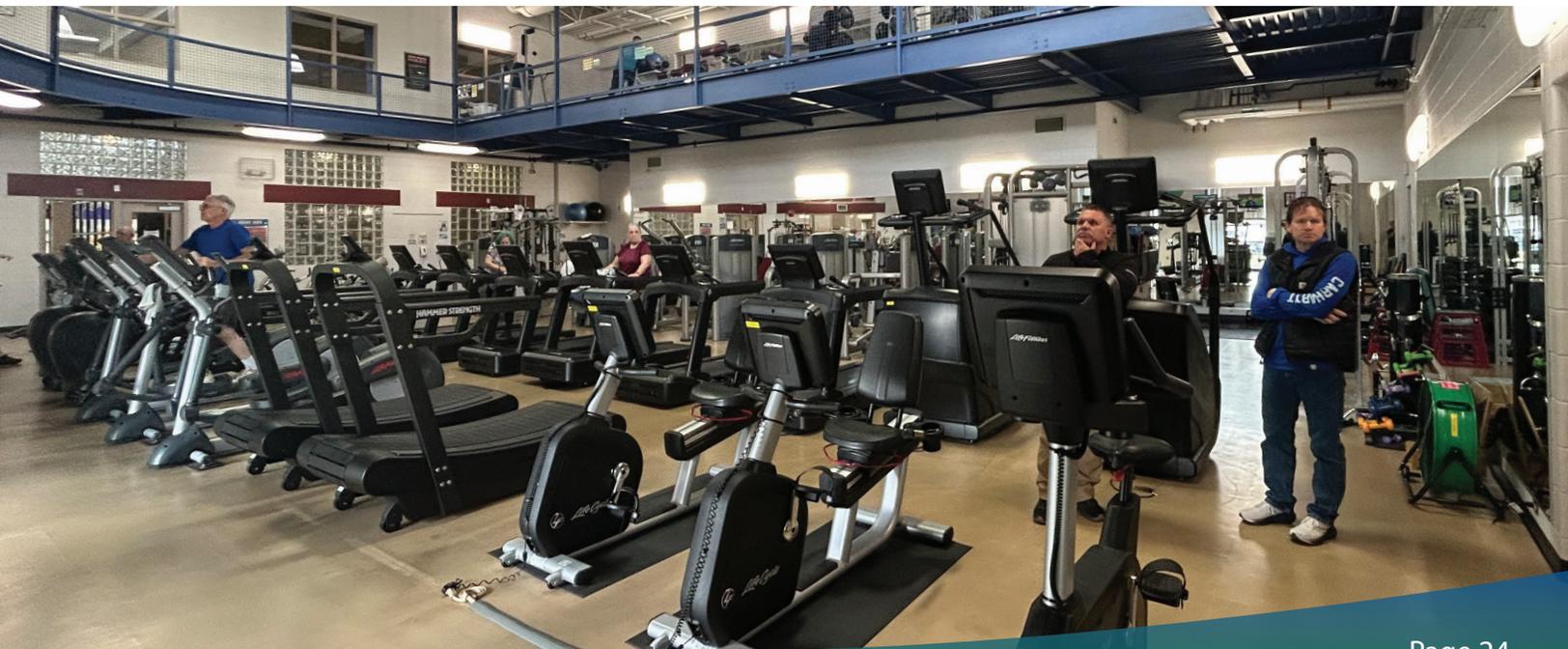
Membership levels are strong, totaling approximately 1,500 members, driven primarily by aquatics and fitness programming. Pricing is thoughtfully structured to balance affordability with responsible cost recovery, with rates differentiated by residency. Annual memberships range from \$355–\$564 for residents and \$509–\$805 for nonresidents.

Role of Philanthropy and Partnerships

Philanthropy played a significant role in initial construction but plays a limited role in ongoing operations. Leadership noted that reliance on one-time capital gifts does not eliminate long-term operating pressures.

Key Observations and Considerations

The TAG Center highlights the benefits and limitations of municipally operated recreation facilities launched with philanthropic support. While stable, the model remains exposed to municipal budget constraints.



Peer Facility Profile: Sauk Prairie Aquatic Center (Prairie du Sac / Sauk City, Wisconsin)



Community Context and Facility Origin

The Sauk Prairie Aquatic Center serves the Prairie du Sac and Sauk City area, with a combined population of approximately 7,900 residents. The facility opened in 2022 as part of a \$64 million School District referendum, with approximately \$12 million allocated to the aquatic center.

Facility Description and Amenities

The 39,000-square-foot facility includes an eight-lane competition pool with diving, a warm-water leisure pool, party and meeting rooms, and modern locker and changing areas. The facility is designed primarily for aquatic use and does not include a public fitness center.

Ownership and Governance Structure

The facility is owned and operated by the Sauk Prairie School District and funded through School District Fund 80. Governance and capital responsibility are integrated into the School District's broader financial structure.

Operating Model and Staffing

Staffing includes two full-time administrative positions and part-time lifeguards and instructors. Custodial services are provided through the School District. Leadership emphasized the importance of Fund 80 support to maintain operations.

Financial Performance and Subsidy

The annual operating budget is approximately \$420,000, with the School District contributing roughly 62 percent through Fund 80 dollars. This subsidy allows the facility to break even while maintaining low user fees.

Membership, Pricing, and Usage

The facility serves approximately 700 annual passholders. Adult memberships are priced at \$110 annually, with family memberships at \$250. The facility hosts numerous competitive swim meets and regional events.

Role of Philanthropy and Partnerships

Philanthropy plays a minimal role. The operating model is heavily dependent on public funding and School District financial capacity.

Key Observations and Considerations

The Sauk Prairie model demonstrates how School District ownership and Fund 80 support can sustain a modern aquatic facility, while also concentrating financial responsibility within a single public entity.



Peer Facility Profile: Whitewater Aquatics and Fitness Center (Whitewater, Wisconsin)



Community Context and Facility Origin

The Whitewater Aquatics & Fitness Center serves the City of Whitewater (population 16,000) and the surrounding university population. The facility opened in 2001 and functions as a major community and regional fitness asset.

Facility Description and Amenities

The 30,000 square foot facility includes two indoor pools, a fitness center, and a group exercise room. There is not a gymnasium associated with this facility. The size and amenity mix reflect its role as a regional facility serving both residents and university affiliates.

Ownership and Governance Structure

The facility is owned by the Whitewater School District and operated by the City of Whitewater under a long-term lease agreement. Governance responsibilities are shared, with ownership and capital responsibility resting with the School District and operational control managed by the City.

Operating Model and Staffing

Staffing includes a full-time Director, supervisors, instructors, lifeguards, and maintenance staff. Leadership described the operation as complex due to the facility's age and scale.

Financial Performance and Subsidy

The facility operates with an annual municipal subsidy and maintains a capital reserve funded jointly by the City and School District. Despite this, deferred maintenance and capital expenses remain a concern.



Membership, Pricing, and Usage

Membership levels are strong at approximately 2,600, supported by both university and broader community use. Pricing reflects the scale of the facility and its operating costs while remaining regionally competitive. Annual membership fees are \$574 for adults and \$747 for families.

Role of Philanthropy and Partnerships

Philanthropy plays a limited role. The model relies primarily on public funding and intergovernmental cooperation.

Key Observations and Considerations

The Whitewater model illustrates the benefits and challenges of shared ownership and operations, including flexibility and complexity related to capital responsibility and long-term maintenance.



Operational and Ownership Model Options

Based on the existing conditions assessment, community and stakeholder engagement, and peer facility comparisons, Innovative Public Advisors (IPA) identified five operational and ownership models for consideration for the Symons Recreation Complex. These models represent realistic and commonly-used approaches for community aquatic and recreation facilities and are intended to frame clear, actionable decision options for the City of Richland Center and Richland County.

The five models reflect different approaches to ownership, governance, funding, and risk allocation. Each model presents a distinct set of tradeoffs related to public control, financial sustainability, capital responsibility, and long-term flexibility. No model is inherently right or wrong. Instead, the purpose of this analysis is to clarify the implications of each option so decision-makers can weigh them against community priorities and fiscal realities.

Each model was evaluated using consistent criteria to allow for meaningful comparison across options.

Evaluation Criteria

The following criteria were used to assess each operational model:

- Long-term financial sustainability and exposure to risk.
- Clarity of ownership, governance, and accountability.
- Ability to maintain affordability and community access.
- Operational flexibility and responsiveness.
- Staffing capacity and organizational resilience.
- Responsibility for capital investment and long-term maintenance.
- Alignment with community and member priorities.

Model 1: School District Governance

Under this model, primary operational responsibility for the Symons Recreation Complex would transfer to the local School District, with the facility incorporated into School District operations and funding structures.

Key characteristics of this model include:

- School District management and governance.
- Use of School District funding mechanisms, such as Fund 80.
- Integration of facility operations into School District budgeting and staffing.
- Continued community access outside of school hours.

Strengths of this model include:

- Access to dedicated recreation funding streams.
- Clear governance and one public entity.
- Demonstrated success at peer aquatic facilities.
- Additional access to facility for students.
- Eligible to apply for Innovation Grant funding.
- Staffing efficiency with faculty, staff, and students.

Challenges include:

- Potential misalignment between school district priorities and broader community use.
- Reduced operational flexibility compared to standalone recreation entities.
- Tax levy shift to the school district for financial capacity.
- Governance decisions driven primarily by educational objectives.
- No clear funding source for capital improvements.

This model can provide financial stability but may limit community-wide control and flexibility.

Model 2: Private Entity Ownership

Under this model, ownership and operation of the Symons Recreation Complex would transfer to a private, for-profit entity. Public entities could retain influence through contractual agreements related to access, pricing, or service levels.

Key characteristics of this model include:

- Private ownership and management.
- Operations driven by business and profitability considerations.
- Potential contractual protections for public access or affordability.
- Reduced public financial exposure.

Strengths of this model include:

- Transfer of financial and capital risk away from public entities.
- Potential operational efficiencies.
- Eligible for Innovation Grant funding.

Challenges include:

- Profit motives that may conflict with community values.
- Risk of increased fees or reduced access.
- Limited examples of successful private operation of community aquatic facilities in similar markets.
- Reduced public control over long-term outcomes.

This model offers risk transfer but presents significant concerns related to affordability, access, and mission alignment.

Model 3: Nonprofit Ownership

Under this model, ownership and operation of the Symons Recreation Complex would transfer to a nonprofit organization governed by a community-based board. Public entities could maintain involvement through agreements, funding support, or board representation.

Key characteristics of this model include:

- Nonprofit ownership with independent governance.
- Ability to pursue philanthropic funding and partnerships.
- Separation from direct public levy constraints.
- Continued public influence through formal agreements.

Strengths of this model include:

- Increased flexibility in fundraising and foundation partnerships.
- Clear mission-driven governance.
- Potential reduction in long-term public financial exposure.
- Streamlined decision making process and ability to take action.
- Eligible for Innovation Grant funding.

Challenges include:

- Reliance on sustained fundraising and leadership capacity.
- Governance and succession planning risks.
- Continued need for public or philanthropic support.
- Variability in long-term financial stability without an endowment.

Peer facilities demonstrate that nonprofit ownership can be effective, but success depends heavily on organizational capacity and sustained community support.

Model 4: City and County Ownership and Management (Status Quo)

This model continues the current structure, with shared ownership and management by the City of Richland Center and Richland County, supplemented by philanthropic support. It represents the most familiar and least disruptive option. However, it also relies on ongoing municipal levy support, which may become increasingly difficult to sustain in future fiscal years given statutory levy limits and competing municipal priorities.

Key characteristics of this model include:

- Continued public ownership by the City and County.
- Annual operating support tied to City and County budgets.
- Existing governance and staffing structures largely unchanged.
- Philanthropic contributions supporting operations or capital needs.

The primary strengths of this model are continuity, institutional knowledge, and minimal transition risk. The facility is currently well-managed and strongly supported by the community.

Challenges associated with the status quo include:

- Continued reliance on levy-limited public funding.
- Complicated governance under multiple public entities.
- Unclear long-term responsibility for major capital investment.
- Limited flexibility to adapt to future financial pressures.
- Increasing long-term risk as the facility continues to age.
- Ineligible to apply for Innovation Grant funding.

This model performs adequately in the near term but presents continuing sustainability challenges over time if capital and governance remain unresolved.

Model 5: Single-Entity Ownership: City or County

Under this model, ownership and operation of the Symons Recreation Complex would transfer fully to either the City of Richland Center or Richland County. Other entities could maintain involvement through funding support or board representation. This model relies on ongoing municipal levy support, which may become increasingly difficult to sustain in future fiscal years given statutory levy limits and competing municipal priorities.

Key characteristics of this model include:

- Transfer of full ownership to the City or County.
- Sole burden on single taxing entity.

Strengths of this model include:

- Clear governance with only one public entity.
- Retain human resources functions, information technology support, WRS benefits, and other municipal services.
- Streamlined decision making process and ability to take action.
- Eligible for Innovation Grant funding.

Challenges include:

- Tax levy shift and responsibility to one government entity.
- No clear funding source for capital improvements.
- Long-term financial security.

Summary of Model Evaluation

Each operational model presents distinct advantages and tradeoffs. All of the models evaluated are technically feasible; however, each carries its own unique benefits, challenges, and risk considerations. No single model fully eliminates financial or operational risk. Instead, long-term sustainability is influenced by how clearly responsibilities are defined, how capital investment is planned, and how well the model aligns with community priorities and available financial capacity.

Models that rely primarily on continued municipal levy support—particularly Models 4 and 5—may present additional challenges over time given the constraints of Wisconsin’s levy limit framework and the competing priorities faced by local governments. As a result, while these models remain viable options, their long-term feasibility will depend on the willingness and capacity of municipal partners to maintain the ongoing levy support.

Across engagement findings and peer comparisons, models that provide clear accountability, diversified revenue sources, and intentional capital planning consistently demonstrate stronger long-term performance. These findings directly inform the financial and sustainability analysis presented in the next section of this report.

Financial Analysis

This section evaluates the financial implications of the five operational models under consideration for the Symons Recreation Complex. The analysis focuses on operating performance, funding structure, capital responsibility, and long-term financial risk. **The purpose is not to identify a single “low-cost” option, but to understand how financial obligations and exposure shift under each model.**

Current Financial Baseline

The Symons Recreation Complex operates with a narrow but generally stable annual operating margin when public contributions are included. In 2025, total operating revenues were \$495,504.93, compared to total operating expenses of \$478,333.81, resulting in a positive operating result of \$17,171.20.

Key characteristics of the current financial baseline include:

- Earned revenue, particularly memberships, as the primary funding source.
- Annual operating levy support from the City of Richland Center totaling approximately \$53,960.
- Annual operating levy support from Richland County totaling approximately \$53,960.
- High labor and utility costs inherent to aquatic operations.
- Limited capacity to absorb unplanned expenses without additional support.

Capital reinvestment needs are not captured in the annual operating budget and represent a separate and growing financial obligation. While 2025 closed with a modest surplus, the operating margin remains structurally narrow relative to the scale and capital intensity of indoor aquatic facilities, and annual performance may fluctuate based on enrollment trends, staffing levels, utility costs, and unexpected repairs.

Financial Drivers and Constraints

Across all models, several financial realities remain constant. Key financial drivers include:

- Staffing costs, which represent the largest share of annual expenses.
- Utility costs associated with pool operations and building systems.
- Routine maintenance and pool-related supplies.
- Programming costs that support usage and membership retention.

Key financial constraints include:

- Levy limits and competing public priorities.
- Community expectations for affordability.
- Aging infrastructure requiring increasing capital investment.
- Limited ability to materially increase fees without affecting access and participation.

These conditions frame the financial performance of each operational model.

10-Year Financial Modeling and Comparative Projection

To support informed decision-making, Innovative Public Advisors (IPA) developed a 10-year financial projection (2026–2035) evaluating the current structure and each operational alternative.

The modeling evaluates:

- Projected operating revenues
- Projected operating expenses
- Anticipated capital reinvestment needs
- Required public subsidy over time
- Distribution of tax burden across jurisdictions
- Estimated per-household impact under each model

This analysis is designed to clarify not only total cost exposure, but also how financial responsibility shifts geographically among taxpayers depending on the governance structure selected.

Core Financial Assumptions

Operating Revenue

- 0–1% annual membership growth
- 2% annual fee adjustments
- No major facility expansion assumed

Operating Expenses

- Personnel growth: 3–4% annually
- Utilities: 4% annually
- General inflation: 3% annually

Capital Reinvestment

- Increasing system replacement needs over next decade
- Major mechanical and infrastructure costs anticipated in Years 5–10
- Capital needs not fully supported within current operating structure

Model 1: School District Governance

Under a School District governance model, operating and capital responsibility would shift to the District. Financial implications include:

- Access to dedicated recreation funding mechanisms, such as Fund 80.
- Potential assignment of capital responsibility within the School District structure.
- Reduced direct financial exposure for the City and County (tax levy shift).
- Dependence on voter support and School District financial capacity (possible future referendum).

Operating Outlook (10-Year Trend)

- Initial subsidy modeled at approximately \$100,000.
- Greater structural stability due to dedicated recreation funding authority.
- Capital responsibility centralized within School District planning.

Projected Year 10 subsidy: approximately \$125,000–\$150,000 depending on cost trends.

Taxpayer Impact

This model materially changes who pays. Under a School District subsidy of \$100,000:

- Estimated impact: approximately \$21.76 annually on a \$250,000 property (based on current District equalized value).
- City residents may see a decrease compared to the combined City/County burden today.
- County residents outside the School District boundary would pay nothing.
- School District residents outside the City may begin contributing if not currently contributing through the City levy.
- The School District taxpayer impact could be offset with an Innovation Grant award.

This represents a redistribution of financial responsibility across the educational tax base rather than a net elimination of cost. This model improves capital clarity and stabilizes operations but places Symons within broader School District fiscal priorities and voter referendum dynamics.

Model 2: Private Entity Ownership

Under private ownership, operating and capital risk would largely transfer away from public entities. Financial implications include:

- Reduced public operating and capital exposure (tax levy reduction), alleviating taxpayers.
- Profit-driven pricing and service decisions.
- Contractual payments may be required to preserve public access.
- Limited public control over long-term reinvestment decisions.

Projected public exposure by Year 10: minimal to moderate, depending on access agreements.

Taxpayer Impact

- City and County levies eliminated or significantly reduced.
- Direct property tax burden may decline to near zero.
- Affordability and access may shift to fee-based funding.

This model transfers financial and capital risk away from public entities but introduces policy risks related to mission alignment, affordability, and long-term access.

Model 3: Nonprofit Ownership

Under nonprofit ownership, financial responsibility would shift to an independent organization. Financial implications include:

- Increased flexibility to pursue grants and philanthropic support.
- Ongoing fundraising requirement estimated at \$150,000–\$250,000 annually.
- Capital campaigns required periodically (every 5–7 years).
- Financial risk concentrated within the nonprofit entity.
- Reduced public operating and capital exposure.

Projected Year 10 public support requirement: minimal to moderate, depending on access agreements.

Taxpayer Impact

- Reduced City and/or County levy support.
- Per-household impact potentially declines to approximately \$12–\$18 annually (City) and \$3–\$5 (County), depending on public participation level.
- Greater reliance on voluntary contributions and philanthropy.

Financial viability depends heavily on leadership capacity, board strength, and sustained fundraising success. This model can be financially viable with strong leadership and sustained fundraising capacity but does not eliminate the need for public or philanthropic support.

Model 4: City and County Ownership and Management

Under the current structure, modest revenue growth is projected to lag behind expense growth. As a result:

- The annual combined public subsidy (currently approximately \$108,000) is projected to increase steadily.
- By Year 10, the combined subsidy requirement is projected to reach approximately \$175,000–\$225,000 annually, depending on capital treatment and cost containment.

Taxpayer Impact Distribution

The current model relies on annual, levy-limited budget subsidies where:

- City residents pay both City and County portions.
- County residents outside the City contribute through the County levy only.
- There is limited opportunity to significantly diversify revenue sources.

Estimated household-level impacts (based on a \$250,000 property):

- City levy portion: \$28.80 annually
- County levy portion: \$6.28 annually
- Combined impact for a City property owner: \$35 per year
- County-only property owner: \$6 per year

Because the City has a smaller equalized value base, the City subsidy produces the largest per-property impact. This model preserves continuity but concentrates long-term operating and capital risk within levy-limited municipal budgets. As capital needs escalate, exposure to episodic borrowing or levy increases becomes more likely.

Model 5: City or County Ownership

Under City or County ownership, financial responsibility would shift to one government entity. Financial implications include:

- Consolidated subsidy responsibility and reliance on one entity's tax levy.
- Eligible for Innovation Grant funding in early years.
- Long-term subsidy trajectory similar to current structure but concentrated in one levy.

Projected Year 10 subsidy: approximately \$200,000+ depending on capital treatment.

Taxpayer Impact

If assumed by the City:

- City residents bear full burden.
- County residents outside City no longer contribute.

If assumed by the County:

- Broader tax base absorbs cost.
- Per-property impact lower than City-only model.

Clear governance improves accountability but does not eliminate long-term capital exposure.

Key Takeaways for Taxpayers

The current City subsidy represents the largest per-dollar impact on individual taxpayers because the City's tax base is smaller than the County's. A typical City property owner (valued at \$250,000) contributes approximately \$28.80 annually through the City levy. The County contribution has a much smaller per-property impact due to its significantly larger equalized value. For most property owners, the County portion is approximately \$6.28 annually on a \$250,000 property.

Under a School District Fund 80 model (\$100,000 subsidy), the estimated impact would be approximately \$21.76 annually for a \$250,000 property based on current District equalized value. This model would eliminate the current County levy contribution and redistribute responsibility across School District taxpayers. Importantly, some County residents outside the School District boundary may no longer contribute to the facility under this model, while some non-City School District residents would begin contributing.

In practical terms, the household-level financial impact under any of the models evaluated is generally measured in tens of dollars per year, not hundreds. Accordingly, the primary policy consideration is less about significant individual tax burden and more about which governmental entity is best positioned to assume long-term operating and capital responsibility, and how that responsibility is distributed geographically across taxpayers.

Model Comparisons

Model	Year 1 Subsidy	Year 10 Subsidy	\$250K City Property	\$250K County Property	\$250K School District Only
School	\$100K	\$125K	\$22–\$28	\$0	\$22–\$28
Private	\$0–\$50K	\$0–\$75K	\$0–\$10	\$0	\$0
Nonprofit	\$50K	\$75K	\$12–\$18	\$3–\$5	Depends
Current*	\$108K	\$210K	\$35–\$50	\$8–\$12	\$0
Single Entity*	\$110K	\$225K	\$40–\$60	\$0	N/A

* While the current model and the single-entity governance models are feasible on paper, in practice they rely on continued dedicated municipal levy support or the establishment of alternative revenue sources that reduce reliance on the property tax levy.

Capital Investment and Long-Term Sustainability

Capital reinvestment represents the most significant long-term financial exposure facing the Symons Recreation Complex. Constructed in 1987, the facility is now nearly four decades old and entering a phase in which major building systems are approaching or exceeding their typical life cycles. While the facility remains operational and safe, age-driven reinvestment is no longer a future consideration—it is an emerging financial reality.

Industry benchmarks for aquatic facilities indicate that core systems typically require replacement within the following timeframes:

- HVAC and major mechanical systems: 20–30 years
- Pool filtration and circulation systems: 20–25 years
- Roofing systems: 20–30 years
- Pool finishes and deck surfaces: 15–25 years
- Locker room plumbing, fixtures, and finishes: 20–30 years
- Electrical systems and controls: 25–35 years

Given these life-cycle standards, multiple systems at Symons are now within extended service life or will require significant reinvestment within the next 5–10 years.

Estimated 10-Year Capital Exposure

While detailed engineering analysis would be required for precise figures, peer aquatic facilities of similar age and size typically experience cumulative capital reinvestment in the range of:

- \$500,000–\$1,500,000 for major mechanical system replacement (HVAC).
- \$400,000–\$1,200,000 for pool infrastructure rehabilitation.
- \$300,000–\$800,000 for roof or building envelope work.
- \$250,000–\$750,000 for locker room and interior modernization.

Taken together, a reasonable planning estimate for Symons over the next decade is:

- \$1.5 million to \$3 million in capital reinvestment, exclusive of any expansion.

This estimate reflects system replacement and modernization needs necessary to sustain safe and reliable operation.

Structural Funding Gap

The current operating structure does not include a capital reserve contribution sufficient to address long-term reinvestment at this scale. For example:

- A \$2 million capital need over 10 years would require approximately \$200,000 annually in dedicated capital funding to avoid borrowing.
- Recent operating surpluses (approximately \$17,000 in 2025) would generate roughly \$170,000 over 10 years (less than 10% of projected needs).

This gap illustrates that operating stability alone does not equate to long-term sustainability.

Without a defined reserve strategy, capital costs are likely to be addressed through:

- Episodic borrowing
- Levy adjustments
- Deferred maintenance
- Reactive repairs at higher long-term cost

Capital Responsibility by Governance Model

The governance structure selected will directly influence how capital risk is managed and funded.

- **Under the current shared model**, capital responsibility remains divided and not fully defined, increasing ambiguity around long-term funding commitments.
- **Under a School District model**, capital responsibility would be centralized and potentially supported through referendum authority or Fund 80 planning.
- **Under a private ownership model**, capital risk transfers away from public entities but depends on profitability and contract stability.

- **Under a nonprofit model**, capital would rely heavily on sustained fundraising capacity and board leadership.
- **Under a single public entity model**, responsibility becomes clear but concentrated within one levy structure.

Regardless of governance structure, capital reinvestment cannot be supported solely through membership revenue or modest operating surpluses.

Capital Risk Without External Support

Absent reliable external support, capital costs will continue to place pressure on public budgets or result in deferred maintenance. Deferred investment increases long-term costs, operational risk, and the likelihood of disruptive facility failures.

Key capital risks include:

- Accumulation of deferred maintenance.
- Increased likelihood of unplanned closures or service disruptions.
- Greater financial exposure when emergency repairs become unavoidable.
- Reduced ability to align capital investment with strategic priorities.

Long-Term Capital Sustainability

The core financial question facing the community is not whether Symons can operate year to year — current performance demonstrates that it can. The central question is whether the community is prepared to fund reinvestment measured in millions of dollars over the next decade.

Long-term sustainability will require:

- A defined capital reserve policy.
- Clear ownership and funding responsibility.
- Alignment between governance authority and capital obligation.
- A proactive strategy rather than reactive system replacement.

Absent an intentional capital funding framework, structural financial risk will increase over time, regardless of the operational model selected.

Other Possible Funding Solutions

In addition to the governance and operational options outlined above, the City and County may consider strategic partnership models designed to diversify revenue sources and reduce reliance on annual tax levy support. Two potential partnership-based funding strategies are described below:

1. Medical and Rehabilitation Partnership

Symons Recreation Complex could explore a formal partnership with a regional medical provider or physical rehabilitation organization to utilize designated space within the facility for therapy and wellness services. Under this model:

- A healthcare provider would lease space or pay an annual access fee to utilize Symons' aquatic, fitness, or rehabilitation-friendly amenities.
- Services could include physical therapy, aquatic therapy, cardiac rehabilitation, post-surgical recovery programs, or medically supervised wellness programming.
- The provider would benefit from access to an established facility without the capital costs of constructing specialized aquatic or rehabilitation infrastructure.

This arrangement could generate:

- Direct lease or program revenue.
- Increased daytime utilization of the facility (improving operational efficiency).
- Potential referral traffic converting rehabilitation patients into long-term members.
- Importantly, this model aligns with broader public health objectives while creating a stable, non-tax revenue stream to offset required City and County levy contributions.

2. Bulk Membership Agreements with Institutional Partners

Symons could also pursue bulk or institutional membership agreements with major community stakeholders, including:

- Richland School District.
- Regional healthcare systems.
- Larger private employers.
- Governmental entities.

Under this approach:

- Organizations would purchase memberships at a discounted group rate for employees, staff, or potentially students.

- Membership costs could be subsidized as part of employee wellness programs or benefits packages.
- Contracts could be structured annually to provide predictable revenue streams.

Benefits of this approach include:

- Upfront revenue commitments.
- Improved membership stability.
- Enhanced community wellness outcomes.
- Reduced per-member acquisition costs.

For employers, these agreements may also support workforce recruitment and retention efforts in a competitive labor market, particularly if bundled into broader employee wellness initiatives.

Taxpayer Impact Analysis

A key aspect of evaluating the financial implications of alternative governance models for the Symons Recreation Complex is understanding how much individual property taxpayers currently contribute to its annual public subsidy and how those contributions would change under alternative models, such as Fund 80 support from the school district.

In 2025, the City of Richland Center and Richland County each contributed \$53,960 toward the Symons operating budget (totaling approximately \$107,920 in combined public subsidy). The following analysis translates these contributions into estimated impacts on an individual property taxpayer’s annual bill.

Current Taxpayer Contribution (City and County Model)

In 2025, the City of Richland Center contributed approximately \$53,960, and Richland County contributed approximately \$53,960, for a combined public operating subsidy of approximately \$107,920.

The City of Richland Center had an equalized value of \$468,309,100 in 2025. The Symons-related portion of the City tax levy equates to:

- $\$53,960 \div \$468,309,100 = \$0.0001152$

Estimated annual impact for a City property with a value of \$250,000 = \$28.80

Richland County had an equalized value of \$2,147,672,600 in 2025. The Symons-related portion of the County tax levy equates to:

- $\$53,960 \div \$2,147,672,600 = \$0.0000251$

Estimated annual impact for a County property with a value of \$250,000 = \$6.28

Because the County's tax base is substantially larger, the per-dollar tax impact of the County subsidy is significantly smaller than the City impact. Combined, a City resident's total contribution would be the sum of the City and County portions as calculated above.

School District (Fund 80) Model Impact

If the Richland School District were to assume an annual \$100,000 subsidy to support Symons operations through Fund 80, the estimated tax impact can be calculated using the District's equalized value.

Richland School District Equalized Value (2024): \$1,151,535,242

Assumed annual Symons subsidy (Fund 80): \$100,000

- $\$100,000 \div \$1,151,535,242 = \$0.00008684$

Estimated annual impact for a School District property with a value of \$250,000 = \$21.71

Note: This is an estimate based on the District's 2024 equalized value and a \$100,000 assumed subsidy. Final figures should be updated using the certified equalized value for the year immediately preceding any transfer and the final subsidy level adopted by the School Board.

Key Takeaways for Property Taxpayers

- The current City subsidy represents the largest per-dollar impact on individual taxpayers, because the City's tax base is smaller than the County's. A typical City property owner (valued at \$250,000) contributes approximately \$28.80 annually through the City levy.
- The County contribution has a much smaller per-property impact due to its significantly larger equalized value. For most property owners, the County portion is approximately \$6.28 annually on a \$250,000 property.
- Under a School District Fund 80 model (\$100,000 subsidy), the estimated impact would be approximately \$21.76 annually for a \$250,000 property based on current District equalized value.
- In practical terms, the household-level financial impact under any of the models evaluated is generally measured in tens of dollars per year, not hundreds.
- The primary policy consideration is therefore less about significant individual tax burden and more about which governmental entity is best positioned to assume long-term operating and capital responsibility for the facility.

Innovation Grant Opportunity

The Wisconsin Department of Revenue (DOR) is offering the Innovation Grant to assist municipalities and counties that transfer one or more allowable services to another eligible governmental entity. There is approximately \$297 million available statewide, and an eligible local government may receive up to \$10 million annually for five years under a qualifying contract. The annual grant award equals 25% of the total cost of providing the transferred service in the calendar year immediately preceding the transfer. The cost of the service may not increase more than 15% over the five-year period.

For Richland County and the City of Richland Center, the Innovation Grant presents a meaningful opportunity if a service transfer is pursued. Because parks and recreation services are eligible under the statute, a formal transfer of operational responsibility for the Symons Recreation Complex could qualify. **If the County and City desire to pursue the Innovation Grant in March 2026, the recommended path forward is to transfer operational responsibility to the Richland School District.** This approach would establish a structure aligned with recreation programming, community expectations, and available state funding mechanisms, including Fund 80 and potential eligibility for unrestricted funding for up to five years.

Based on 2025 operating expenditures of \$478,334, a qualifying transfer could make Richland County eligible to receive \$119,583.50 per year (25% of 2025 costs) for up to five years—potentially totaling nearly \$598,000 in unrestricted state support, subject to DOR approval and contract terms. This transfer would also eliminate the City's annual levy contribution as soon as FY2027.

Innovation Grant funding is unrestricted. It could help offset transition-related costs, reduce short-term levy exposure, and create financial capacity to address capital reinvestment needs during the early years of a new governance structure. Grant proceeds could be allocated to each of the participating entities according to an intergovernmental agreement. While the grant does not eliminate long-term operating or capital responsibility, it provides a substantial transitional funding opportunity that could materially improve the financial feasibility of a Symons governance or ownership restructuring.

Recommendations

The analysis conducted as part of this study confirms that the Symons Recreation Complex is a valued and well-used community asset, but one that faces increasing long-term pressure related to aging infrastructure, narrow operating margins, and an evolving governance environment. **With the primary objective of reducing reliance on the City and County levies, we recommend exploring Models 1, 2, and 3 using the steps outlined below.** These steps are intended to preserve what the community values most about Symons while positioning the facility for long-term operational and financial sustainability. The recommendation emphasizes decision principles and implementation actions that allow the City of Richland Center, Richland County, and their partners to move forward deliberately and transparently.

With that said, if the City and County intend to pursue the Wisconsin Department of Revenue Innovation Grant in March 2026, the report strongly recommends advancing a transfer of operational responsibility to the School District. Doing so provides the clearest and most viable path to meet the program's eligibility requirements and timeline while positioning the Symons Recreation Complex within a governance and funding structure that also aligns with long-term operational sustainability. If the Innovation Grant is not pursued, it is recommended the City and County evaluate the governance and operational models that broaden financial responsibility and **reduce long-term reliance on the municipal levy**, ensuring the facility remains sustainable while allowing the City to manage competing fiscal priorities.

1: Establish Clear Long-Term Ownership and Governance

The most critical step toward long-term sustainability is establishing a governance and ownership structure that clearly defines authority, accountability, and responsibility for both operations and capital investment.

2: Align the Operational Model With Financial and Capital Capacity

Each of the four operational models evaluated presents viable but distinct tradeoffs. Decision-makers should select a model that aligns not only with community values, but with realistic financial and capital capacity.

3: Strengthen Capital Planning and Fundraising Capacity

Capital reinvestment will be unavoidable over the next decade, regardless of ownership model. Proactive planning and external support will be essential to managing this risk.

4: Preserve Affordability and Community Access

Survey results and engagement consistently confirm that affordability and access are central to the community's support for Symons. Any future operational model should explicitly protect these values.

Implementation Strategy

Implementation should be approached as a phased, decision-driven process, rather than a single action. The following strategy outlines a practical path forward.

Phase 1: Direction Setting and Consensus Building

This phase focuses on aligning elected officials, boards, and key partners around a preferred operational direction. Key steps include:

- Reviewing and discussing the findings of this study in joint or coordinated meetings.
- Identifying a preferred operational model or short list of models.
- Establishing shared decision criteria and success measures.
- Communicating clearly with the public about the purpose and timeline of next steps.

Phase 2: Detailed Feasibility and Transition Planning

Once a preferred model is identified, additional technical and legal work will be required to move from concept to implementation. Key steps include:

- Refining governance, ownership, and financial structures.
- Developing or revising intergovernmental, nonprofit, or operating agreements.
- Identifying transition costs and timelines.
- Confirming roles related to staffing, assets, and liabilities.

Phase 3: Funding Strategy and External Support

As part of implementation, a clear funding and support strategy should be established. Key steps include:

- Formalizing fundraising expectations and leadership roles.
- Aligning public contributions with long-term financial capacity.
- Establishing mechanisms to support ongoing capital reinvestment.

Phase 4: Implementation and Ongoing Evaluation

The final phase focuses on executing the selected model and monitoring performance. Key steps include:

- Implementing governance and operational changes.
- Communicating clearly with staff, members, and the broader community.
- Monitoring financial performance, service levels, and capital needs.
- Making adjustments as needed based on experience and performance.

Closing Perspective

Based on the full study process—including financial and operational data analysis, stakeholder interviews, community and member surveys, and meetings with City, County, Foundation, School District, and community partners—it is clear that the Symons Recreation Complex remains a highly valued community asset. Residents, users, and stakeholders consistently expressed strong support for maintaining the facility and the programs it provides. At the same time, the analysis also confirms that the current structure presents increasing long-term challenges related to financial sustainability, capital investment needs, and governance clarity. Encouragingly, the study identifies several viable paths forward that can preserve what the community values most about Symons while positioning the facility for long-term stability.

If the City of Richland Center and Richland County intend to pursue the Wisconsin Department of Revenue Innovation Grant, this report recommends moving forward immediately with a transfer of operational responsibility to the Richland School District. This approach provides the most direct opportunity to leverage the state incentive program while aligning the facility with an organization that already plays a central role in recreation, youth programming, and community use.

If the Innovation Grant is not pursued, the City and its partners should continue advancing the primary recommendations identified in this study—**particularly further exploration of governance and operational structures involving the School District, a nonprofit or provate model**, or another collaborative arrangement that broadens financial responsibility beyond the municipal levy.

The Symons Recreation Complex has served the community well for nearly four decades. The challenge ahead is not whether Symons should continue to exist, but how it should be structured to remain viable, accessible, and responsive for decades to come. With thoughtful leadership and continued collaboration, the City of Richland Center, Richland County, and their partners can position Symons for a sustainable and successful next chapter.

Innovative Public Advisors

March 3, 2026

Dear City of Richland Center and Richland County Leadership,

Thank you for the opportunity to partner with the City of Richland Center and Richland County on this Innovation Planning Grant-supported study of the Symons Recreation Complex. This effort reflects a shared commitment to proactively addressing the long-term operational, financial, and governance needs of a highly valued community asset.

This study was informed by engagement with elected officials, staff, Symons leadership, Foundation representatives, and community members. We appreciate the time and perspectives shared throughout the process, which reinforced the strong community support for Symons and its role in promoting health, wellness, and recreation.

Our analysis confirms that Symons is a well-used and well-regarded facility with a strong membership base, dedicated staff, and programming that aligns closely with community needs. At the same time, the study identifies increasing pressures related to aging infrastructure, narrow operating margins, and a governance structure that has evolved over time rather than being intentionally designed for long-term sustainability. These conditions reflect the challenges facing a mature facility entering its next phase, not a lack of success.

Symons Recreation Complex stands at a strategic crossroads, not because it lacks community support, but because it has it. Residents value the facility, trust its staff, and want it preserved. However, preserving Symons in its current structure will increasingly expose the City and County to capital and fiscal pressures that levy limits alone cannot absorb. If the County and City pursue the Innovation Grant in March 2026, the recommended path forward is to transfer operational responsibility to the Richland School District. This approach would establish a structure aligned with recreation programming, community expectations, and available state funding mechanisms, including Fund 80 and potential eligibility for unrestricted funding for up to five years.

We appreciate the opportunity to facilitate this important initiative and stand ready to support next steps.

Sincerely,



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Appendix A: Symons Recreation Complex Community and Member Survey Report

1. Survey Administration and Statistical Reliability

To inform the Operational Structure Assessment of the Symons Recreation Complex, two coordinated surveys were conducted during January–February 2026: a Community Survey distributed broadly to Richland County and City of Richland Center residents, and a Member Survey distributed to active Symons members. A total of **308 Community Survey responses** and **145 Member Survey responses** were received.

The outreach strategy was intentionally comprehensive. Direct email outreach was conducted using the official registered voter list for Richland County. A project-specific microsite was created to provide background information and link directly to the survey instrument. IPA assisted the City and County with a structured social media plan, and a public input session was held where attendees were provided assistance completing the survey in person. This multi-channel approach was designed to maximize participation and minimize demographic or technological barriers to engagement.

2. Narrative Analysis of Survey Findings

The survey results demonstrate that Symons Recreation Complex is widely viewed as a core community asset. Among community respondents, 76.6% rated Symons as “Very Important,” and an additional 13.3% rated it “Somewhat Important,” meaning nearly 9 out of 10 respondents (89.9%) consider Symons important to the community. Only 10.1% indicated that the facility is less or not important. Among active members, the importance metric is even more pronounced. **95.9% of members rated Symons as “Very Important,”** and 98.7% rated it either “Very” or “Somewhat Important.” Fewer than 2% of members indicated it was less or not important.

This level of agreement is significant. In community surveys, agreement levels above 70% typically indicate strong consensus. Agreement levels approaching or exceeding 90% indicate near-universal alignment. The data supports the conclusion that Symons is not viewed as optional infrastructure, but rather as an integral part of community life.

Importantly, the service-offering responses reinforce this conclusion. Staff hospitality received the highest satisfaction ratings of any service category in both surveys. In the Community Survey, 72.7% of respondents rated staff positively (4 or 5 on a 5-point scale), with minimal dissatisfaction. Among members, **staff performance was even stronger, with 91.7% reporting satisfaction** and a mean rating of 4.52—the highest average score across all services evaluated. These results indicate that the people delivering the service are a clear and measurable strength of the organization.

Core indoor amenities, including the swimming pool, fitness room, and weight room, also performed well, particularly among members. For example, swimming pool satisfaction exceeded 83% among members, reinforcing that frequent users view the facility’s primary offerings favorably. While certain infrastructure-related

areas (such as locker rooms) show room for improvement, dissatisfaction is concentrated in facility condition rather than service delivery or staff performance.

The open-ended “one word” responses further underscore these findings. The most frequently used descriptors from the Community Survey included **convenient**, **community**, **necessary**, and **essential**, reflecting the facility’s perceived role in local quality of life. Among members, the most common words included **awesome**, **friendly**, **wonderful**, and **vital**. The prominence of words such as “friendly” aligns directly with the high staff hospitality ratings and reinforces that interpersonal experience is a defining strength of Symons.

Importantly, this positive sentiment is not limited to members. The broader community, including non-members, expresses strong support for the facility’s presence. Taken together, the importance ratings, exceptionally strong staff satisfaction scores, solid performance of core services, and overwhelmingly positive qualitative descriptors consistently portray Symons as a valued, community-centered institution with strong service delivery and broad public support.

3. Overall Satisfaction

Satisfaction levels further reinforce the Symons Recreation Complex’s positive standing. Within the Community Survey:

- 35.7% reported being “Very Satisfied”
- 37.3% reported being “Satisfied”
- **Combined, 73.0% of respondents report positive satisfaction.** Only 5.8% report being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

This indicates that dissatisfaction is limited to a small minority of the population. While 21.1% selected “Neutral,” neutrality does not equate to opposition and may reflect limited usage rather than a negative experience.

Among members, satisfaction levels are substantially higher:

- 60.0% reported being “Very Satisfied”
- 33.1% reported being “Satisfied”
- In total, **93.1% of members report positive satisfaction.** Only 1.4% report dissatisfaction.

These results suggest that individuals who regularly use the facility experience it positively. The difference between member and broader community satisfaction is consistent with usage patterns—frequent users are more likely to report a strong positive experience.

Community Survey - Service Satisfaction

Highest-Rated Services	Mean	% Satisfied	% Dissatisfied
Staff Hospitality	4.01	72.7%	5.8%
Swimming Pool	3.89	68.2%	5.2%
Hot Tub	3.70	53.9%	3.9%
Sauna	3.63	46.4%	3.6%
Fitness Room & Equipment	3.60	53.6%	8.1%

Key takeaways:

- Staff hospitality is the strongest-performing service element in the community survey.
- The swimming pool performs well (mean 3.89, 68.2% satisfaction).
- Core indoor amenities (fitness room, hot tub) remain net positive.
- Dissatisfaction levels are generally low across these top services.

Mid-Rated Services	Mean	% Satisfied	% Dissatisfied
Hours of Operation	3.59	56.5%	14.9%
Cost to Visit/Membership	3.54	52.3%	17.5%
Weight Room & Equipment	3.48	46.4%	9.1%
Outdoor Trails	3.48	41.6%	4.5%
Fitness Classes	3.44	36.0%	4.5%

Key takeaways:

- Cost and hours begin to show higher dissatisfaction rates (15–17%).
- These may represent areas where improvement or communication could reduce friction.

Lowest-Rated Services	Mean	% Satisfied	% Dissatisfied
Locker Rooms	3.06	39.9%	31.2%
Outdoor Tennis/Basketball	3.12	22.7%	10.1%
Racquetball Courts	3.24	24.4%	4.5%
Former Campus Gym Basketball Court	3.34	28.9%	2.3%

Key takeaways:

- Locker Rooms are the clear outlier in the Community Survey, with 31.2% dissatisfaction.
- Outdoor and specialty facilities show lower engagement and satisfaction.
- The data suggests infrastructure or condition concerns may exist with locker areas.

Member Survey - Service Satisfaction

Highest-Rated Services	Mean	% Satisfied	% Dissatisfied
Staff Hospitality	4.52	91.7%	3.4%
Swimming Pool	4.23	83.4%	5.5%
Hours of Operation	4.18	84.1%	9.7%
Cost to Visit/Membership	4.15	82.8%	5.5%

Key takeaways:

- Members are overwhelmingly satisfied with staff.
- The pool performs strongly (mean 4.23).
- Cost and hours are viewed more positively by members than by the broader community.

Core Fitness Amenities	Mean	% Satisfied	% Dissatisfied
Fitness Room and Equipment	3.88	69.7%	5.5%
Weight Room and Equipment	3.81	65.5%	4.8%
Hot Tub	3.83	60.7%	6.2%
Sauna	3.83	59.3%	3.4%

Key takeaway: Core indoor amenities remain solidly positive among active users.

Lowest-Rated Services	Mean	% Satisfied	% Dissatisfied
Locker Rooms	2.96	42.1%	41.4%
Outdoor Tennis/Basketball	3.03	14.5%	11.0%
Racquetball Courts	3.24	23.4%	3.4%

Key takeaway: Locker Rooms are again the weakest-performing category. Among members, the dissatisfaction rate rises to 41.4%. This is statistically significant and materially higher than any other service area.

Significant Cross-Survey Findings

1. Staff Is a Major Strength

Both surveys rank Staff Hospitality as the highest-performing service element:

- Community Mean: 4.01
- Member Mean: 4.52

2. Core Indoor Amenities Are Solid

- Swimming Pool, Fitness Room, and Weight Room all perform well, particularly among members.
- There is no evidence of widespread dissatisfaction with core programming.

3. Locker Rooms are the Primary Problem Area

This is the only service area with:

- Community dissatisfaction exceeding 30%
- Member dissatisfaction exceeding 40%
- Means at or below neutral
- This is a targeted capital or facility condition issue — not an operational or staffing issue.

4. Outdoor and Specialty Amenities Show Low Engagement

Outdoor tennis, basketball, racquetball courts, and secondary gym spaces show:

- Lower satisfaction
- Higher neutrality
- Lower engagement, underutilized assets

Implications for Governance and Financial Discussions

These findings provide several grounded conclusions:

- The existence of Symons is broadly supported. Nearly 90% of community respondents consider it important.
- Service delivery is not generating widespread dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction rates remain under 6% in the community and under 2% among members.
- Members, who are most directly affected by operational decisions, overwhelmingly support the facility.
- Even among the broader public, strong importance ratings indicate that Symons contributes to perceived community vitality and quality of life.

Taken together, the survey data suggests that any discussion about Symons should not be framed around whether the facility is valued. The survey responses clearly indicate that it is. The central policy at question is how Symons can be structured and funded to ensure long-term sustainability and continuity of quality services.

Reallocation of Existing Tax Levy Dollars

Survey responses to the proposal to reallocate existing tax levy dollars to cover increasing operational costs reflect a more divided community perspective than the importance or service-quality questions. Among community respondents, **46.4% expressed support for reallocating existing levy dollars, 34.1% were neutral, and 19.5% expressed opposition.** The mean score of 3.34 (on a 5-point scale) indicates modest support overall, but not broad consensus. Nearly one in five respondents actively oppose this approach, suggesting sensitivity to shifting existing tax resources.

Members were more supportive than the broader community. **Among members, 57.9% expressed support, 35.2% were neutral, and only 6.9% opposed the proposal.** The higher member support (mean score of 3.64) likely reflects the perspective of active users who directly experience the facility's benefits and may be more inclined to support operational stability.

Importantly, these findings contrast with the overwhelming importance ratings (nearly 90% community-wide and 98.7% among members). Residents broadly value Symons; however, there is less agreement on reallocating existing municipal tax levy dollars to sustain operations.

Connection to Innovation Grant and Service Transfer Discussions

The survey findings are particularly relevant to discussions regarding potential governance restructuring or service transfer models under the Wisconsin Department of Revenue Innovation Grant program. Key findings that support structural exploration include:

- 89.9% of community respondents consider Symons important.
- 98.7% of members consider Symons important.
- Dissatisfaction rates are low (5.8% community; 1.4% members).

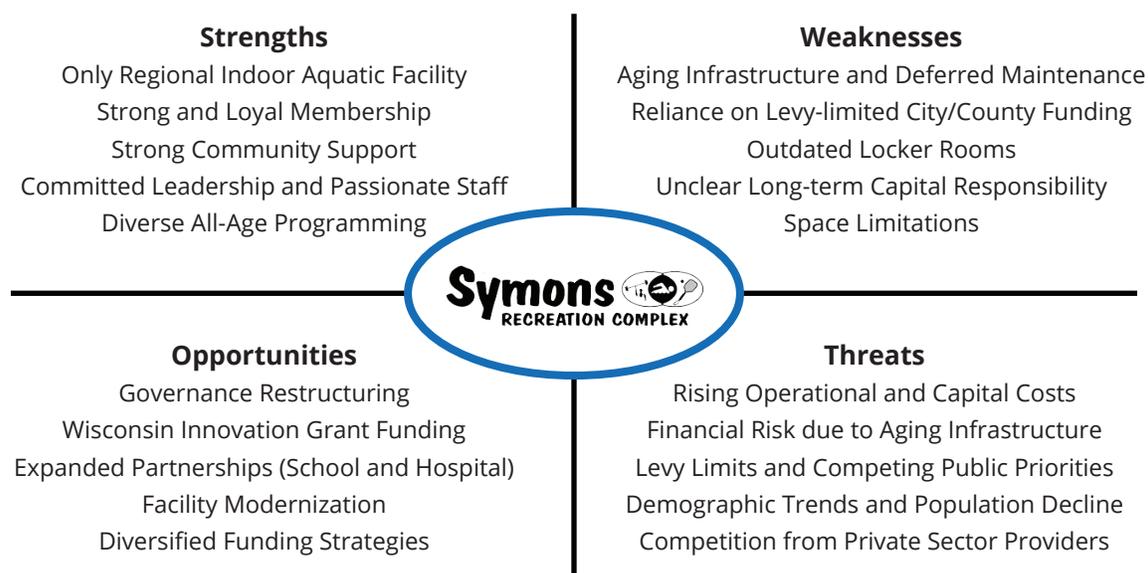
These figures demonstrate that the facility's value is not disputed. Rather, the challenge is financial sustainability and long-term structural stability. This distinction is critical. When evaluating eligibility for service transfer under the Innovation Grant program, one of the most important policy considerations is whether the transferred service remains valued by residents. The data clearly indicates that Symons meets this threshold.

These findings are directly relevant to the study's evaluation of transferring operational responsibility to the School District under Fund 80. Under a Fund 80 model, operational costs would be supported through the School District's Community Service Fund rather than through the City or County's existing levy allocations. This approach differs from simply reallocating current municipal levy dollars. Instead, it creates a separate and transparent funding mechanism specifically dedicated to community recreation programming.

Given that **only 46.4% of community respondents support reallocating existing levy dollars**—and nearly 20% oppose it—the Fund 80 structure may represent a more politically and fiscally viable alternative. It avoids reducing funding for other City or County services and instead establishes a defined recreation funding stream tied to school district taxpayers.

If the City of Richland Center pursues a transfer of operational responsibility to another entity, such as the school district, the survey results provide measurable public support for maintaining the facility under a sustainable model.

Appendix B: SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Analysis



Building on stakeholder interviews, in-person meetings, document review, and early financial analysis, IPA developed a structured Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) framework to organize key themes related to the current operational environment at the Symons Recreation Complex. This analysis is intended to clarify existing conditions, highlight structural dynamics, and identify areas requiring strategic focus.

The SWOT framework is directional rather than conclusive. It is designed to inform subsequent phases of the study, including financial modeling, governance evaluation, and operational scenario testing. Themes identified at this stage reflect recurring patterns across interviews and preliminary data review.

The analysis will be further refined and validated through community surveys, public engagement sessions, and additional financial and peer benchmarking analysis. The final comprehensive report integrates both qualitative and quantitative findings to support actionable recommendations.

Strengths

The Symons Recreation Complex benefits from deep community roots and sustained public support. Nearly four decades of operation have created strong emotional attachment, donor loyalty, and community identity. Stakeholders consistently describe Symons as a cornerstone community asset. Operational strengths include:

- Strong and loyal membership base.
- Committed leadership and passionate staff.
- The only indoor aquatic facility in Richland County, serving as a regional destination.
- Highly valued aquatic programming, including swim lessons, lap swimming, and hot tub use.

- Diverse programming serving youth, adults, seniors, and retirees.
- A welcoming atmosphere and strong sense of community connection.
- Established partnerships with the City, County, School District, healthcare providers, ADRC, and community organizations.
- History of philanthropic investment through the Symons Foundation.

These strengths demonstrate that Symons is not struggling from a demand or community support perspective; rather, it operates from a position of value and loyalty.

Challenges

Several structural and operational challenges have emerged that affect long-term sustainability:

- **Facility and Infrastructure**
 - Aging building systems and deferred maintenance.
 - HVAC replacement needs.
 - Outdated locker rooms and limited family-friendly changing space.
 - Limited fitness equipment variety.
 - Underutilized racquetball courts.
 - Building visibility challenges due to physical site location.
- **Financial Structure**
 - Reliance on levy-limited City and County funding.
 - Limited flexibility within Wisconsin levy limits.
 - No fully defined long-term capital reserve structure.
 - Foundation remains volunteer-led without dedicated professional staff.
- **Governance and Organizational Complexity**
 - Shared governance model with evolving accountability.
 - Perception of unclear capital responsibility.
 - Fluctuating levels of City and County involvement over time.
 - Emotional attachment to the status quo, which may slow structural change.

- **Programmatic Gaps**

- Perception that the facility is more senior-oriented than family-oriented.
- Limited childcare options.
- Space constraints limiting program expansion.
- Recruitment challenges for lifeguards and specialized staff.

These challenges do not reflect operational mismanagement; rather, they highlight structural limitations inherent in an aging facility operating within a constrained public funding environment.

Opportunities

Despite existing constraints, significant opportunities exist to strengthen long-term viability:

- **Partnership Expansion**

- Deeper alignment with the School District, including potential operational integration.
- Expanded partnerships with healthcare providers and wellness programs.
- Collaboration with regional nonprofits and community organizations.
- Corporate sponsorship and regional fundraising opportunities.

- **Facility Reconfiguration and Modernization**

- Reconfiguring racquetball space to create family changing areas or administrative offices.
- Investment in updated fitness equipment and technology.
- Enhancement of outdoor amenities such as pickleball, basketball, tennis, and soccer.
- Leveraging nearby residential development and surrounding property for broader campus planning.

- **Governance and Operational Models**

- Clarifying ownership and capital responsibility.
- Evaluating nonprofit expansion with professional executive leadership.
- Exploring hybrid governance structures that diversify funding and reduce public exposure.
- Utilizing available state programs such as the Wisconsin Innovation Grant in the event of service/ operations transfer.

- **Funding Diversification**

- Expanded grant pursuit.
- Strategic capital campaigns tied to modernization.
- Broader philanthropic engagement.
- Enhanced marketing and communications to strengthen regional brand awareness.

These opportunities suggest that Symons' future viability depends less on demand and more on strategic restructuring and proactive reinvestment.

Threats

Several external factors pose long-term risk if not addressed:

- **Capital and Cost Escalation**

- Increasing building system failures.
- Rising labor and utility costs.
- Deferred maintenance compounding long-term expenses.
- Unplanned closures or major repair events.

- **Financial Uncertainty**

- Competing City and County budget priorities.
- Levy limits restricting flexibility.
- Uncertainty regarding long-term public subsidy commitments.

- **Demographic and Market Trends**

- Aging regional population.
- Limited population growth.
- Competition from private fitness providers and regional recreation facilities.
- Rising consumer expectations for modern amenities.

- **Strategic Risk**

- Absence of a unified long-term capital strategy.
- Potential leadership transitions.
- Delay in decision-making increasing exposure to infrastructure failure.

SWOT Summary

The SWOT analysis indicates that the Symons Recreation Complex operates from a position of strong community value but faces structural and financial pressures that require proactive decision-making. Symons' greatest strength lies in its deep-rooted community support and its unique role as the only indoor aquatic facility in Richland County. The facility benefits from a loyal membership base, diverse programming, strong partnerships, and a nearly 40-year philanthropic legacy. Leadership and staff commitment further reinforce its position as a trusted and well-used community asset.

At the same time, internal challenges are primarily structural rather than demand-driven. Aging infrastructure, deferred maintenance, and HVAC replacement needs create increasing capital pressure. The current reliance on levy-limited City and County funding constrains flexibility, and the shared governance model can create ambiguity around long-term capital responsibility. Facility design limitations—particularly family amenities and visibility—also affect future growth potential.

Opportunities center on modernization, partnership expansion, and governance clarity. There is meaningful potential to expand partnerships with the School District and regional healthcare providers, including the hospital, to strengthen program alignment, shared use and group membership opportunities, and community wellness initiatives. Additionally, the Symons Foundation could play a more significant role in coordinated fundraising efforts, capital campaigns, and long-term financial sustainability planning. Strategic reconfiguration of interior space, enhancement of outdoor amenities, diversified funding strategies, and potential eligibility for state innovation incentives further present pathways to strengthen long-term viability.

Threats are largely external and financial in nature. Rising operational and capital costs, levy constraints, demographic trends, and competition from private fitness providers create pressure on the existing model. Delayed decisions regarding governance and capital planning increase exposure to unplanned system failures and reactive spending.

Overall, the SWOT analysis suggests that Symons is not facing a crisis of relevance or participation; rather, it is at a strategic crossroads. Long-term sustainability will depend on aligning governance structure, capital planning, expanded partnerships, and philanthropic engagement with the facility's enduring community value.