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With another pool closed, Sydney's councils struggle to keep city cool

By Jacob Saulwick
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Sydney's councils are struggling to keep up with the cost of upgrading the city's ageing swimming pools, with another pool forced to close over the summer.

The 50-metre outdoor pool at Lane Cove was due to start being replaced next year, but after the discovery of a "rapid decline in the structure of the pool," council staff decided to close the pool late last month.

The closure comes as Parramatta remains without a pool – after the state government demolished the council-owned pool for an expanded Parramatta Stadium – while other councils wrestle with how to revamp their ageing facilities.

Lane Cove Acquatic Centre, where the council has recently had to close its 50-metre outdoor pool. DOMINIC LORRIMER

"Pools are so expensive," said Pam Palmer, the mayor of Lane Cove.

Cr Palmer said the council would move to replace the outdoor pool at the Lane Cove Aquatic Centre "as quickly as possible", but also pointed to a longer-term problem of councils having insufficient funding to build and maintain decent swimming spots.

"There is no money for councils to build big outdoor pools," said Cr Palmer.

The difficulty for councils in finding the money to maintain pools is an element in the ongoing debate about the absence of a Parramatta Pool. That debate also hinges on a seeming paradox: pools become more affordable to run

when they generate more money for the council, but they can only make more money if councils invest more in them to start with.

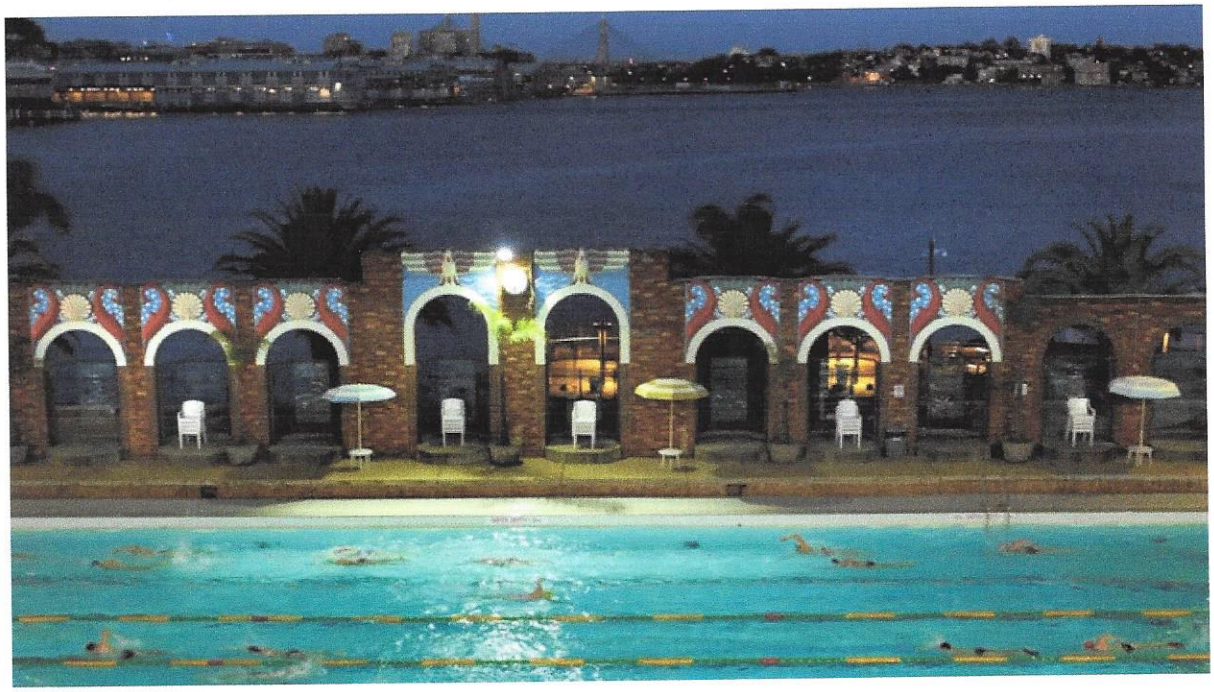
For this reason, Parramatta Council was pushing the state government to part-fund a larger facility to replace the Parramatta Memorial Pool that was demolished last summer for the Western Sydney Stadium.

"Swimming pools alone will never pay for themselves," said an independent councillor at Parramatta, Lorraine Wearne.

"Pools always rely on subsidies from council. That subsidy can certainly be aided by construction and inclusion of facilities around the pool such as a gym, a coffee shop, child minding even for parents who want to come and swim for an hour."

To that end, Parramatta Council wanted to replace the pool with a larger aquatic centre, which could have held classes all year round while also raising money from services.

"The figures that we were shown were that over the longer term it would be better for us as a council to spend more money initially," said Donna Davis, a Labor councillor.



North Sydney Olympic Pool needs an upgrade. KATE GERAGHTY

The government, however, refused to increase its offer above $30 million, and now says it will build a pool for that price itself.

Other councils across the city are also struggling with how to replenish ageing facilities. In North Sydney, some councillors last year took a ratepayer funded fact-finding mission to Melbourne to consider ways to revamp North Sydney Olympic Pool. The council had earlier endorsed a plan to replace the North Sydney pool, a project that would likely take place between late 2019 and 2021.

And inner west councillors are split, meanwhile, on the best way of securing funding for much-needed repairs to Dawn Fraser Baths in Balmain.

Linda Scott, a City of Sydney councillor and the president of Local Government NSW, welcomed comments from Planning Minister Anthony Roberts that the government was considering more use of developer levies to pay for local infrastructure.

"Sydney is already more densely populated than Chicago and Los Angeles, and the need for supporting community infrastructure such as pools, libraries and green public space continues to grow," Cr Scott said.