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## Swim Clubs Struggle to Stay Afloat

As Memberships Dry Up, Fewer Funds Are Available to Pay for Repairs

By [Amy Gardner](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Beneath the sparkling-blue surface of scores of the region's neighborhood swim clubs is a troubling new reality: Many of them are crumbling physically and financially.

At pools built 40, 50 or 60 years ago, bath houses are moldering. Pumps do not work. A sinkhole threatens the entire parking lot of one club in [Fairfax County](#). And at the same time that many of these clubs need new people and their money, pool memberships are plummeting.

In many neighborhoods, older families no longer have young children. Two-career families have no time. And some immigrant families are less inclined to join because they are new to the area or because the pool does not hold the same cultural value for them as it does for generations of suburban Americans.

As a result, dozens of private clubs across the area are at risk of closing. Some already have, and others are teetering. Still others have figured out how to survive by reaching out to newcomers and immigrant communities

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Bob Sweeney and his son, Wyatt, 14 months, enjoy a day at the North Springfield Swim Club. The club, like many, has had a drop in members. (By Nikki Kahn -- The Washington Post)

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Privately owned, nonprofit pool clubs have long been a part of the suburban culture. For decades, families in the region's bedroom communities have joined local swim clubs, spending their summer days competing in swim and dive meets and meeting friends and neighbors. Today, about 80 such clubs exist in Fairfax and about 50 in [Montgomery County](#). These numbers do not include apartment complexes or community pools controlled by homeowner associations.

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At its pinnacle, 340 families belonged to Kemp Mill, Waller said. Today, 205 families are members, and the pool is "treading water," he said. Annual dues, about \$450, cover operating expenses, but there are no funds to put aside for long-term improvements. The pool needs a new \$50,000 surface, or white coat. And recently, Waller dismantled stalls, showers and toilets from the old Our Lady of Good Counsel High School when it was being demolished "because I couldn't afford to redo the bathrooms, and mine were falling apart."

At the North Springfield Swim Club in Fairfax, the pool was quiet on a recent weekday, nestled in a grove of mature trees at the end of a short cul-de-sac and mottled with afternoon sunlight. The club's president, [Bill Nelson](#), said pool membership has dwindled so much that in some years it has had trouble filling the age groups on the swim teams.

The surrounding neighborhood has a large immigrant population, but reaching out to them has been a challenge. Lilly Arrate, a pool member who moved to the United States 18 years ago, said some of her friends are newcomers for whom the \$375 annual fee is too high.

Chatting at a pool picnic table under the shade of a giant oak tree, a friend of Arrate's added that some Latinos are intimidated by the language and culture barriers and, as a result, shy

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from neighborhood pools. Arrate said she and her three sons come to the pool nearly every day in summer. "I love it here," she said.

Many pools continue to thrive in such affluent inner enclaves as North Arlington, McLean and Bethesda, where initiation fees exceed \$1,000 and waiting lists stretch four years or more. Farther afield, in neighborhoods with more new immigrants and an older population, the story mirrors that of Kemp Mill: In Springfield and Burke, Bowie and Rockville, private swim clubs have fallen into disrepair and, having lost many members over the past decade or two, cannot pay for the new plumbing, pumps, bath houses or decks they so desperately need.

In some cases, pools have gone under. In the Kings Park and Kings Park West neighborhoods along Braddock Road in central Fairfax, two clubs have closed just in the past two years: Royal and Kings West.

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The two pools became overwhelmed by a growing backlog of maintenance needs and a dwindling roll of members to help pay for it all. So many other pools in that part of the county are struggling to survive that [Fairfax Supervisor Sharon S. Bulova \(D-Braddock\)](#) convened a "pools roundtable" with representatives of more than a dozen area clubs to talk about what the county could do to help. Among the recommendations was to encourage private clubs to apply for a reduced property tax rate under a new state law that allows them to do so, [Bulova](#) said. About 60 such pools qualify, according to the county's tax office.

A similar effort has occurred in Maryland, where lawmakers passed legislation two years ago to allow counties to reduce taxes for private, nonprofit pools. Forty-eight pools are eligible in Montgomery County; in [Prince George's County](#), the total number is unknown, but three private pools have applied for the benefit, officials there said.

Bulova said she was motivated to help pools as part of a larger effort to address neighborhood decline in her district.

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Bob Sweeney and his son, Wyatt, 14 months, enjoy a day at the North Springfield Swim Club. The club, like many, has had a drop in members. (By Nikki Kahn -- The Washington Post)

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"Village West would not have opened in May of 2007 without that tower," said the pool's president, Krystal Whitehouse, who added that the club's dwindling membership fees would not have covered the water bill or the management contract. "It's going to be another five years before the pool is fully solvent, but it will happen. It will be a very viable pool."

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North Springfield has reached out to immigrants, drawing from the neighborhoods around nearby North Springfield Elementary School and its diverse population, said Nelson, the pool's president. Arrate, the Salvadoran

The pool explored the possibility of a Muslim swim hour to accommodate families whose faith forbids women to be seen in swimsuits in public. Nelson said he dropped the idea after concluding that it would be legally inappropriate to schedule only female lifeguards for duty during those hours, or to demand that they cover up to accommodate Muslim tradition.

Todd Livick, president of Parliament Pool in the Fairfax neighborhood of Kings Park, has

helped turn the club's fortunes around with a careful budget, a rigorous volunteer culture and a one-time fee last year to cover badly needed repairs. The risk is that the fee will scare off old members. The alternative, Livick said, is closing. And the question remaining is how much time that fee has bought his pool.

"I'm not a big fan of nickel-and-diming our members every other year," Livick said. "But you know, we haven't figured out exactly what we're going to do."

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