Can’t Go In the Water — Pools Closed

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The sweltering South Tampa summer inspires many residents to cool off with a dip in a local pool. But if you live south of Kennedy Boulevard and north of Gandy Boulevard and want to swim in a local public pool this summer, you’ll stay hot and dry.

The only two public pools serving Downtown, Channelside, Davis Islands, Harbour Island, Hyde Park, Palma Ceia, Sunset Park, Beach Park and other South Tampa neighborhoods have been closed all summer. The historic Roy Jenkins Pool, at 154 Columbia Drive on Davis Islands, never opened in 2009 and the Loretta Ingraham Interbay Pool at the corner of Manhattan Avenue and Estrella Street has been closed since May 20. The City of Tampa, which operates 13 public pools in the city limits (down from 15 a few years ago), also never opened Williams Park Pool, at 4362 E. Osborne Ave. in East Tampa, leaving only 10 pools currently operating in Tampa.

Why are the local pools closed during the hot summer months? You can get in a sweat over the reasons:

• Safety and Legal Concerns: A new federal regulation aimed at reducing injuries and drowning took effect late last year. It requires public pools to replace drain covers to be compliant with the law.

• Aging Pools: New drain covers sometimes restrict the flow of drain water, preventing pools from cleaning the water well enough to meet standards. Plumbing repairs on aging pools can be difficult, expensive and are sometimes impossible.

• Budget Woes: A staggering economy and a shrinking budget for parks and recreation services combine to leave little money available to upgrade public pools.

At a July 16 meeting of the Tampa City Council, Tampa Parks and Recreation director Karen Palus acknowledged that the Roy Jenkins Pool, which first opened in 1920, will not open in 2009. The Williams Park Pool will also stay closed this year. She said that the city is trying to reopen the Interbay Pool.

The Roy Jenkins and Williams pools cannot satisfy the new federal anti-drowning standard imposed by the Virginia Graeme Baker Act and also keep their water clean enough for public swimming.

With the parks department facing operations and budget cutbacks, city officials decided it would not be cost-effective to upgrade the plumbing and filtration systems at the Roy Jenkins and Williams pools at this time. Those pools closed at the end of last summer, but the city discovered the problem when it filled them this year and never opened them.

City officials are referring South Tampa residents to the Bobby Hicks Pool near Robinson High School, the only pool south of Kennedy Boulevard that is currently open. The Bobby Hicks Pool, at 4120 W. Mango Avenue, is eight miles southwest of the Roy Jenkins Pool and five miles south of the Interbay Pool. “Bobby Hicks is where the direction of our resources is pointed right now,” Palus said.

Tampa City Council member John Dingfelder summarized the sentiment of South Tampa residents: “I think there’s been some frustration.” Regarding the Roy Jenkins Pool, Dingfelder said: “I have a great concern that they’re going to mothball that pool.”

Added council member Linda Saul-Sena: “The Roy Jenkins Pool situation seems like something that should be addressed immediately.” She asked if the pool could be designated as a historic structure, which would impart certain protections and possibly make the pool qualify for grants that would allow it to be renovated.

Dingfelder suggested that private interests form a non-profit corporation or start raising money to help save the Roy Jenkins Pool after Palus said that about$500,000 was available for pool upgrades citywide this year. “Maybe there is an opportunity for a public-private partnership,” Dingfelder said.

The Virginia Graeme Baker Act was passed by Congress in December 2007 and took effect in December 2008. Named after a 7-year-old girl who drowned in 2002 because she got sucked into a drain at the bottom of a hot tub, the new law requires public pools to install anti-entrapment drain covers that meet upgraded safety standards.

But the new drain covers can restrict the flow of drain water below the allowable minimum of 400 gallons per minute, Palus said, requiring additional plumbing work to meet the 400-gallon minimum and meet state health requirements for water purity.

The Interbay Pool had this problem of inadequate flow of drain water, Palus said. The Interbay Pool was drained shortly after it closed, but little work has been done in July.

Asked if she expects the Interbay Pool to reopen, Palus said: “We’re working hard to get that one operational, hopefully before the end of the year.” The pool is normally open yearround.

Generations of Davis Islands and South Tampa residents have learned to swim at the Roy Jenkins Pool. The pool opened in 1920 and is one of the oldest public pools in the state. Its above-ground design and sand-filtration system is unique.

“Certainly Davis Islands needs this pool,” said City Council member Charlie Miranda. “Recreation for kids in swimming is a great thing; it keeps their mind busy and their body active. It’s part of our history. It’s an engineering marvel.”

Davis Islands resident Jennifer Fadal urged the City Council “to determine how much it will take to bring the pool into compliance.” She noted that Davis Islands residents banded together to raise about $100,000 to upgrade the Bayshore Little League complex a few years ago. Her husband, Cristan Fadal, fretted that inaction is “sentencing the pool to an early demise.”

But fixing the Roy Jenkins Pool will be expensive. Just how expensive is anybody’s guess. Palus said it could be as little as $200,000 to $300,000 to get it operating again, but if plumbing problems occur, the tab could multiply 10-fold, to as much as $2.8 million or more, according to officials.

“We just don’t know,” Palus said. “When you open up something that old, there are almost always other issues,” she said. “Right now our funds are limited. We only have about $500,000 for pool upgrades for the whole city. When you throw a lot of money at one thing — we’re in a no-win.”

Complicating the plight of the Roy Jenkins Pool is the issue of the construction of a linear park on Davis Islands that will include the pool site. Planned for more than three years and financed by $1 million from Tampa General Hospital, the park is scheduled to break ground in November after several delays. But depending on the fate of the pool, the project could need to be altered.

Palus promised an architectural consultant’s $75,000 feasibility study on the future of the Roy Jenkins Pool would be completed “by the end of the fall,” long after the summer heat recedes.