

# RECREATION MANAGEMENT

THE MAGAZINE WITH IDEAS & SOLUTIONS FOR RECREATION, SPORTS & FITNESS FACILITIES MANAGERS

Sponsored by:



## Water Works

Cornerstone Aquatics Center in West Hartford, Conn.

By Dawn Klingensmith

There are several characteristics of Cornerstone Aquatics Center in West Hartford, Conn., that make it distinctive.

Its water is so pure it's been called "sacred."

It is a public-private partnership. The town owns it, and a private company runs it.

It makes money.

Oh, and let's not forget the underwater stationary bikes, underwater treadmills and aqua-spinning classes. Although the public-private partnership might seem like a novel approach to aquatics facility management, the contractual arrangement between West Hartford and the company, Aquatics for Life, was formed 18 years ago. At the time, the town had a newly renovated aquatics building, but it also had a strained budget and a staff shortage. Researching possible solutions, the town came across Aquatics for Life. The company said it could make Cornerstone Aquatics Center self-supporting, with no taxpayer subsidies, if the town would simply stand out of its way.

"The best way to describe it is the town is like a landlord, and Aquatics for Life is the tenant," said Jim Capodiece, director of West Hartford's Department of Human and Leisure Services.

Aquatics for Life takes care of all the day-to-day operations, while the town is responsible for the building's structural maintenance. "If anything goes wrong with a major structural system like the plumbing, that's our responsibility," Capodiece said.

The partnership is advantageous to both parties. Among other benefits to West Hartford, public school swim teams get to use Cornerstone for free and the town's youth swimming program receives a discount. And while most municipal pools lose hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, Cornerstone's revenues consistently exceed expenses by a comfortable margin.

Aside from making money, Cornerstone Aquatics Center stands apart because of its water's purity. Although the water contains chlorine as required by state law, a sanitation system based on drinking-water purification technology continuously eliminates byproducts of chlorine that cause eye and skin irritation; plus, there's no chlorine odor or taste. Patrons have reported that they don't need to shower after they swim because they smell fresh and feel cleansed, said Dave Rowland, president, Aquatics for Life. "The water is exceptionally clear. There's almost a silky texture to it," he added. The sanitation system was developed by Simply Water, Kingwood, Texas.

Two years ago, Cornerstone added an aquatics cross-training center, called XTC, consisting of 16 underwater stationary bikes and four underwater treadmills. Hydorrider, an Italian company, manufactured the submersible equipment. XTC also features exercise areas on the pool deck, and greatly enhances Cornerstone's other amenities—an 11-lane, 25-yard lap pool with a diving well, a multipurpose pool with zero-depth entry, a hydrotherapy pool and a traditional fitness room with cardiovascular and strength-training equipment.

Rowland said XTC entices people who aren't lap swimmers to exercise in the water. "There are health benefits not only from swimming but from just being in the water. I feel the population as a whole would really benefit by getting in water, not only from a health and fitness standpoint but also for mental well-being," he said. "Studies have shown being in water causes the body to release chemicals similar to those released in deep meditation."

There's no question that swimming, aqua aerobics and other underwater exercises provide an effective and often superior workout. For example, running on land works your leg muscles only when you push off, while running in water provides for multidimensional resistance, making muscles work constantly.

In addition, water constricts blood vessels, making your heart work harder.

And water keeps you cool so you can exercise longer and more vigorously than you normally would on land.

Rowland said Cornerstone's success is due in part to the constant accessibility of its lap pools. To accommodate other programming, most aquatics centers allow lap swimming only at certain times. At Cornerstone, the pool is open for lap swimming all the time.

Two popular programs—triathlon training and a two-week training course that prepares high school girls for swim season—also drive the facility's success.

In addition, Cornerstone's biannual Dive for Sunken Treasure, held in spring and fall, is always well-attended. In its first year, Rowland had hoped to find small toys that would sink to the bottom of the pool and stay put, but most floated to the surface. Instead, kids dive for brightly painted rocks, which they trade in for candy-free goodie bags.

Aquatics facilities often try to attract more patrons by offering more "dry" elements, such as juice bars and day spas. "We're not headed in that direction," Rowland said.

He is not opposed to the idea per se and would consider such additions himself if he had the space. But aquatics facilities that aren't succeeding at the very basic level of attracting people to swim probably should focus on that as opposed to diversifying, he said.

Rowland also believes it's misguided for municipalities to try to create small-scale versions of commercial waterparks, complete with slides, lazy rivers and dump buckets. "A family wants to go to a waterpark for a day of endless stimulation, and there are parks that do that well. What we do here is very different. We teach people to use water for their entire lives, to improve overall health, fitness and well-being.

"If do it right, people will come just to be in the water, swimming and splashing around."

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

**Cornerstone Aquatics Center:** [www.swimcornerstone.com](http://www.swimcornerstone.com)

© Copyright 2009 Recreation Management. All rights reserved.